University of Alberta

A Narrative Inquiry of the Intercultural and Academic Transitional Experiences of Four Female Chinese Students

by

Yi Li

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education

Department of Secondary Education

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Date: March 20, 2001

To live is to change,

but to grow is to change often.

The essence of life is transition--

a pilgrimage, if you prefer.

-Philip R. Harris (1985, p. 322)

University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled **A Narrative Inquiry of the Intercultural and Academic Transitional Experiences of Four Female Chinese Students** submitted by **Yi Li** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of **Master of Education**.

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Date: March 7, 2001

To *Guoji*

Abstract

This is a study of the transitional experiences of four Chinese female students as they left China for study in Canada. The four participants—Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose—were born around 1980, finished their high school education in China, entered a Canadian high school for a university preparation program, and started their undergraduate years at the University of Alberta. Through narrative inquiry, they reflected on the process of their cultural and academic adjustment into a new country, gained some insights into their past experiences, and set directions for their future lives. Their experiences of transitions were captured in three themes: Being Told What to Do: High School Experience in China, Not Knowing What to Do: High School Experience in Canada, and Learning to Know What to Do: University Experience in Canada. Recommendations and suggestions were made in the form of three letters to parents in China, educators in China as well as educators in Canada.

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When I began my master's program two and a half years ago, I did not anticipate the encouragement, support, and care that I would receive along my rocky research journey. Many people have helped me to go where I wanted to go, even though at times I myself was not sure where I was going!

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Chapter One Introduction

A Narrative Beginning

My role as a researcher began today. I went to the first class of this term this evening, looking forward to a year of great learning and intellectual growth.

It was a "Curriculum Foundations" course. Because there were twenty-two students, too big for a graduate course, they decided to split the class into two. My professor seemed to me a nice teacher.

While rearranging the furniture in the classroom, a classmate of mine and I singled out one desk and one chair in front of the blackboard for the professor. However, he protested that he did not want to sit too far away from his students. So he moved himself and sat among us, in a circle of desks and chairs. I felt uneasy because never before did a professor sit, not stand, so close to me in a classroom!

After handing out the course outline and briefly explaining what we were going to do this term, the professor played a video about the charter school idea. He then asked us to form into small groups of three to discuss it and tape record our discussion. I had never heard about this idea, how could I possibly participate in the discussion in a meaningful way?

When I was with my discussion partners, most of the time I found myself acting like an interviewer, asking them a lot of questions about this charter idea. I had no idea how the public school system works in Alberta, let alone the charter idea.

Feeling overwhelmed, I just sat there and listened to my partners talking, trying very hard to understand their English and make sense of what they were talking about. With a very high TOEFL score and pretty good command of English, I had thought I would not have much difficulty in a Canadian classroom!

I knew they were talking in English, Canadian English. But it was very different from the American English and British English which I had been studying for more than a decade. They were talking too fast for a pair of poor foreign ears. I found myself still processing the first sentence while they had already moved into the middle of the second one.

I guessed that neither of my partners felt enthusiastic about the idea. However, they both agreed that it is good as an alternative to challenge the public school system and force it to improve and make changes. Public schools in Alberta are doing just fine, they told me.

45 minutes later, the class gathered to share the discussion results. I was expecting that the professor would sum up by offering his opinion on the issue. And I would know whether it was a good idea to introduce the charter idea into the Alberta school system. But he never did! Instead, he just made a comment or two during our sharing.

> I left the classroom, feeling upset and confused because I still did not know the correct answer to the question. I wanted to ask my professor for the correct answer after the class. But on second thought, I decided to wait. Perhaps he would offer the correct answer in the next class...
>
> (Journal entry, September 8, 1998)

As I relive those moments two years later, I can still feel the frustration, dizziness, and bewilderment during that first month in Edmonton, on a foreign campus in a foreign country.

Of course, the professor never provided me with a correct answer. Neither did he lecture to the class most of the time. Instead, most of the class time was devoted to group discussions and sharing of ideas and insights among class participants. When I found that this classroom practice was the norm, rather than the exception, I began to really wonder whether I would learn anything useful in this graduate school!

In the meantime, I found myself catching up on almost everything academic or non-academic. Apart from finishing those endless readings for my courses, I spent most of my waking hours in front of a computer in the education library. I would practice searching the ERIC database and e-mailing to my GPU account. When I found my document in my account, I had a sense of great achievement. I would also practice improving my word-processing skills and learning to use new educational software programs, such as Endnote, which was one of the assignments for my research methodology course.

I was ready to meet the challenges posed by the academic world. However, I did not foresee the difficulties I would have to encounter in my day-to-day living in this foreign country. I had made the assumption that, as in China, once I

registered in my program I would have everything ready for me: the courses I needed to take, and the place I had to live in. I remembered when I started my undergraduate years in China, after I registered, I found out where my classroom would be, and I even received the key to my dormitory. My six roommates were my classmates throughout the four years of study. We took the same courses and we stayed in the same classroom most of the time. The professors would come to our classroom and teach us.

Therefore, I was surprised to know that I had to look for housing myself on campus in Edmonton. By the time I realized that, it was already mid-August. I was staying with my husband in Jasper then and had a part-time job. Since I was a stranger to Edmonton I chose to live on the University of Alberta (U of A) campus. So I faxed my application form immediately and applied to live in the student residence in Hub Mall (Hub) because it was cheaper, and near the Education building. They told me that they would put me on the waiting list. I assumed that they had to give me some place to stay in after I registered. So I told my husband that I "got" a spot in Hub. Of course, he was angry at the end of August when he realized that I was only on the waiting list. Knowing that I did not have a spot in Hub, he phoned his friends around Edmonton from Jasper in search of accommodation for me. Unfortunately, they all lived quite far away from the university.

In the end, one of the friends mentioned that there were three old houses, in between the Suite Hotel and Newton Place, which would be torn down in October 1998. I phoned the owner and explained my difficult situation. He was

sympathetic and agreed to let me move in for just a month so that I could look for other possibilities.

The very first month in Edmonton, I stayed in that run-down house with another student at the U of A. It was only five minutes' walk from the Education building and it was better than living on the streets. I still remember how hard I tried to convince myself of that by looking at the positive side. It could have been worse.

On September 3, 1998, I secured a spot in Hub and was extremely relieved at the thought of moving into a warm and cozy place, where I could concentrate on my studies and enjoy my life in a foreign land instead of shivering on the streets in winter. Completely unprepared was I for what would happen for the following five months and 18 days in that horrible place--my dream of pursuing an advanced education in this foreign land was almost shattered!

Unlike most of my Canadian colleagues, who knew why they were in graduate school, I had no clear idea why I was in my graduate program at the beginning. I guess I just had a vague idea that I wanted to do a master's degree in the area of education so that I would be better qualified as a teacher and would find a teaching job in this new country.

While still searching for my research topic, I had many conversations with my professors and colleagues about the notion of a learner-centered approach to the teaching and learning in western countries both inside and outside of the classroom. I found this approach upsetting at first because I did not believe that any learning could occur under such circumstances. And yet as time went by, I

started to question my own assumptions about teaching and learning because I found myself highly motivated to learn more about my subject area: the teaching and learning of English in China. There was something in this learner-centered approach! Later, I realized that this was the approach I had been experimenting with throughout my professional career in China, without consciously knowing it. I always encouraged my students to take a more active role in my English classrooms because my own learning experiences had led me to believe that students are ultimately responsible for their own learning and language learning should be learner-centered.

By December 1998, I had decided on my research topic: to introduce a learner-centered approach into the teaching and learning of English in Chinese classrooms. I was so enthusiastic about my project that I went back to Shanghai in April 1999 to look for my potential research site. To my great disappointment, the teachers in one secondary school were just too busy to accommodate my research agenda. What's more, with a class of sixty students, they did not believe that my approach would work. I, too, realized that there would be major challenges in adapting a learner-centered approach to such a large class size. Some younger teachers did show some interest in my project, but I had no confidence that I was ready to carry out this research project. So I returned to the U of A in September 1999 and took a course in action research while trying to figure out what I was going to do for the rest of my master's program.

In mid-September I happened to meet two Chinese students, Jasmine and Rose (both pseudonyms) in the gym. I was on my way to my locker when Jasmine

called my English name. I was amazed that they still remembered me. I had met them earlier in February when they and their classmates visited the university on an open house day. Their ESL teacher was a Canadian friend of mine and she wanted me to do some interpretation for them during the university campus tour because of their limited English language abilities.

As the mid-Autumn Festival was around the corner, Jasmine and Rose along with two other students I had met, Magnolia and *Mei* ("plum blossoms", also pseudonyms), invited me over to their place to celebrate this traditional Chinese holiday, a time of family reunions.

In order to save money, Jasmine, *Mei* and Magnolia shared a one-bedroom apartment in the basement of an apartment building while Rose stayed with her cousin's family.

We wrapped some Chinese dumplings and had some delicious moon-cakes. We had such a good time that I had to stay overnight. Five of us crammed into one bedroom, three on mattresses and two on the floor. They were curious about my life and work. In a sense I was interviewed by four of them about the history of my education, my family, in particular, my love story. I understood their curiosity and their wonderment. Back in Shanghai, I had taught students of the same age for ten years!

Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose come from the coastal cities in the eastern part of China. Jasmine, *Mei* and Magnolia are each the only child of their respective families while Rose has an elder sister, 20 years older than her. They

finished their high school in China and had been studying English as a subject in schools for seven years.

Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose came to Canada in September 1998 and entered a high school in Edmonton for a university preparation program, mainly to improve their English in order to obtain a sufficient TOEFL score and to get ready for their university life. However, after one year of study, none of them met the minimum admission requirement of TOEFL score, i.e. 580. So they were admitted to their undergraduate programs in September 1999 on the condition that they take an ESL course in order to catch up. Therefore, in the first fall term (1999) at the U of A, all four female students took an intensive ESL course, Monday through Saturday, three hours a day. They had to spend a lot of time and work really hard on it because if they failed that course they would have to drop out of the university immediately.

Magnolia planned to take biological sciences and *Mei* intended to take computer science as their majors. *Mei* chose computer science because she was told that it would be easier for her to find a job after graduation. Jasmine wanted to do engineering and Rose was interested in business. All of them wanted to stay in Canada after graduation and they had quite positive attitudes towards Canada.

However, since they had difficulty improving their conversational English, we decided to have regular weekend meetings in English. We talked about everything, but mostly about our schooling experiences in both China and Canada. I tape-recorded all the conversations so that they could go back and listen to their own English and I could help them analyze the mistakes they had made.

It was not until the third conversation that I realized that they were experiencing the same academic difficulties that I had when I started my graduate studies a year before. I began to have this vague feeling that what we shared could become the focus of my thesis research. Although I knew that I wanted to write something personally meaningful and relevant, something that would help others, I was still not sure what my research question would be.

As our weekly sessions of English conversation practice went on, I started to see where these conversations were leading me. Yes, I wanted to write something about us, me and them. I wanted to give an account of our experiences moving to a different culture so that we could gain some insights to facilitate our smoother adjustment into this new world, so that parents in China would know what they should expect when they made the decision to send their children abroad, so that educators in China would know how to better prepare their students academically, and so that educators in Canada would know how to modify their practices in order to better meet the needs of their foreign students. They were all excited when I told them what my research topic would be for my master's thesis and were willing to offer me their stories. Appropriate ethics forms were then completed, signed, reviewed and approved (see Appendixes A and B).

Several researchers mentioned that during the process of cross-cultural adjustment (living in a foreign country), the early days after arrival were of particular difficulty to most of the sojourners (Adler, 1991; Lu, 1998; Sheh, 1994). However, because of the human tendency to only talk about positive things such as achievement, success, and fulfillment, words like "meaninglessness", "failure", and

"depression" are not frequently mentioned. And yet we, who have made that sojourn, lived with those words on a daily basis during the early stages of living in a foreign country.

Research Focus/Questions

Because of my own personal and professional experiences, as well as the literature I have reviewed, I became very interested in the transitional experiences of Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose as they began their overseas study in a foreign high school and then moved into their first year of study in a university. Thus emerged the central research questions of this study:

How do these students experience the transition from a Chinese high school to a Canadian one?

How do they experience the transition from a Canadian high school to a Canadian university?

What are the meanings of these experiences for them?

Within these large questions are even more puzzling questions: What do these students experience in Chinese high schools, a Canadian high school, and a Canadian university? How do they feel about their experiences? What continuities and discontinuities do they experience between a Chinese high school and a Canadian high school, or between a Canadian high school and university? How do they make sense of their transitional experiences? What is it that contributes to greater continuity in their early educational experiences in a foreign

land? What can educators in both Canada and China do to help them experience the transition? What can their parents do to help them be better prepared?

Significance of the Study

In the past several years in China, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of high school students who want to pursue their post-secondary education overseas. Because of the one-child policy and because education has always been valued in Chinese culture, parents in China will try every means possible to help their children complete at least one university degree.

However, in reality because of the fierce competition for limited spaces (only one third of more than three million high school graduates can enroll in the institutions of higher learning annually) it has become more and more difficult to get into first-rate universities in China. Not satisfied to settle for the second- or third-rate ones, parents turn their attention to foreign universities. "The most popular destinations to receive an education abroad are countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom and Singapore" ("Enrollment up", 1999).

With Canada's reputation for cleanliness, safety, low cost of living and quality university education, many young Chinese students come to Canada. This poses many new challenges to individual students, their host countries and educational institutions both at home and abroad.

This study is significant for parents, educators and educational institutions in China and educators and educational institutions in Canada. I hope it will point

to ways that these young sojourners can be better prepared before they go to a foreign culture and how they can be better facilitated after they arrive in the new environment.

Chapter Two Narrative Inquiry as a Research Methodology

Introduction

This research study has emerged out of my own experiences as a graduate student in a foreign university and my attempt to understand other foreign students' experiences of learning and living in a foreign country. I wanted to know the challenges that foreign students like myself encountered and how they found ways to help them manage their situations. I wanted to delve into their learning and living experiences by listening to their stories and exploring how they constructed their realities, and gave meaning to their everyday lives. In the research process of telling their stories of transition, students would have opportunities to reflect on their experiences and through the process, find ways to better manage their lives in a foreign land.

Because of the nature of my study, it did not take me too long to discover that narrative was the most appropriate approach for my inquiry into the students' transitional experiences between two cultures.

In this chapter, I will explore the importance of narrative in my own life, what narrative inquiry is and the process of using narrative inquiry in the study.

The Importance of Narrative in My Own Life

My first encounter with "narrative inquiry" was accidental. When I started my graduate program in September 1998, I had no idea what my research interest would be. However, I knew that I wanted to capitalize on my background of

teaching English for ten years in a university in China and my interest in teaching and learning English.

Fortunately, my supervisor, Dr. Olenka Bilash, helped me out. She suggested that I should start reading some theses done by Chinese graduate students at the Faculty of Education at the U of A to see if I could find something that would interest me. Among them, the most interesting one was a master's project done by Grace (Guiqing) Yao (1997) in the Department of Elementary Education. She employed "narrative inquiry" as her research methodology and told stories of herself, from a young girl disguised in boy's clothes in a small town in Northern China in the 1960s to a kindergarten teacher in Canada in the 1990s, a journey across two cultures. I found myself immersed in her story, smiling at happy events and sighing at sad ones. As a matter of fact, that was the only thesis I finished reading from the start to the end. I no longer thought that doing research was boring. Somehow in my mind I hoped that one day I could do a narrative study as well.

Later, in one introductory course to different research traditions, I learned about "narrative inquiry" as well as other research methods through presentations done by my fellow graduate students. However, at that time, I was confused and overwhelmed by all of the terminology: ethnography, phenomenology, hermeneutics, etc. and thought to myself that I would never figure out what they meant to me!

It was not until I took a course with Dr. Jean Clandinin on "narrative inquiry" between January and April 2000 that I finally came to understand what

"narrative inquiry" was. Dr. Clandinin insisted that I come and meet her personally to make sure that "narrative inquiry" was what I really needed for my study. After she knew about the nature of my study, she gave me the green light to register in her course.

In this course, I felt comfortable in writing and sharing many stories about my teaching, learning and my life in China and in Canada. Through the process of retelling my life story, I began to reflect on my past experiences, to make sense of them and to set the direction for my future life. The following is an account about my experiences living in the students' residence on campus during my first year in Edmonton.

> On October 1, 1998, the second month I was in Edmonton, I moved into a four-bedroom unit in the students' residence of Hub Mall. It was a two-level unit with two bedrooms and a bathroom on the upper level and two bedrooms, a kitchen, a storage room, and a living room on the lower level.
>
> I was surprised to meet Sally and Ruth (both pseudonyms), two Canadian-born eastern Indian girls, who were sleeping in the living room during the day. Why didn't they sleep in their own bedrooms? Didn't they have classes during the day? It was just Thursday. They remained in the living room even after they had met my husband, who was helping me to move.
>
> Later that day, I met Paula (also pseudonym), an international graduate student from India, who moved in with me on the same day. As a matter of fact, Sally asked Paula to exchange their bedrooms so that she became Ruth's neighbor on the upper level while Paula and I stayed downstairs with my bedroom next to the kitchen and hers next to the storage room.
>
> I spent the rest of the day unpacking my stuff and put them in the right places, thinking to myself that I would never move again. Too much trouble! By mid-night that day I was so exhausted that I fell asleep even though it was very noisy in the living room.
>
> The following morning, the younger girl, Ruth, told me that they had invited several friends to have a party and that they wished that the music hadn't been too loud. I told her that the music was VERY loud in the middle of the night, but that I was too tired to be bothered by it.

However, they still invited their friends over the weekend and partied all night long. Sometimes they would cook in the middle of the night. Other times they would leave the unit at small hours in the morning with a loud bang of the unit door and their noisy steps of high heels. I found myself waken up between 2 a.m. and 5 a.m. for three consecutive nights. But I tried very hard to understand them. I kept telling myself that I was in a Canadian university, that it's O.K. to have parties at weekends and that they were young and loved parties.

When Paula and I realized that we were experiencing the same sleeping problem, we decided to do something about it. On October 5, Monday morning, Paula and I, the two new move-ins, talked to them because both of us felt exhausted after constant disturbances during the night. They apologized for the noise they made, but explained that it was difficult for them to turn away their friends. I reminded them about the quiet time rule in the residence handbook and told them that their friends were always welcome except after 11 p.m. and before 8 a.m. We thought ours was a quite reasonable request.

However, nothing changed in the next two days. I talked to the older one, Sally, again on Wednesday. Again, she apologized. But their friends still remained in our unit until after mid-night.

I had to do a presentation for Olenka's undergraduate students between 8 and 9 on Thursday morning on October 8. I really needed a good night's sleep. So at 0:30 a.m. I asked their friends to leave our unit. They were surprised by my desperate action, but they left as it was a polite request.

That was the very first time in my whole life that I had done that. I felt really bad because I was forced to do something rude. As a result, I lost the whole night's sleep. I couldn't even stand steadily while I was doing the presentation, let alone think logically. Fortunately, I had told Olenka before the presentation and then she let the whole class know about my trouble with my roommates. So after the presentation the students didn't bomb me with questions about what difficulties native Chinese-speakers encounter while learning English. I felt nervous because it was the first presentation I ever did in a Canadian classroom and I was not used to being asked questions in public. Back in China, if students had questions they always came to me before or after class on an individual basis and I always had a correct answer for them as most of their questions were from their textbooks or exercises.

I left Olenka's classroom, feeling sad that I could have done it a lot better. I had spent almost a week reading and researching and preparing the handouts for this presentation and yet...

When I arrived in my unit, my two roommates and their two girl friends were talking in the living room. After saying hello to them, I headed towards my bedroom. I had to take an afternoon nap. I thought that even earthquake wouldn't have waked me up, but one of their girl

friends' loud scream did the job. Feeling outraged, I rushed out of my bedroom and screamed with all my might, "Leave here right now!"

Feeling embarrassed, their girl friends left. I sat down at the kitchen table and burst into uncontrollable sobs. In between sobs, I told them that I had never done that before in my whole life, that it was against my nature, and that their behavior left me no better choices.

This scared my two roommates and they tried to calm me down, but in vain. After a while, Sally said, "This is too much for me. I'll go down to the Hub life office to ask for a transfer to a two-bedroom unit."

So she did. But there was a long waiting-list for two-bedrooms and she could not get anything right away. Besides, moving to a two-bedroom unit meant CND $100 more for the monthly rent.

In retrospect, Paula and I know better now why we were "lucky" enough to get our spots in October in that unit. One of their former roommates only stayed for a week and the other stayed for only a month. We were both in a desperate situation and we did not have choices. As winter was coming, it was getting more and more difficult to find a spot in residences on campus.

After the incident, we had four nights of quiet and peace. I thought that they probably had spread the word that one of their new roommates was crazy and that nobody would dare to come again. However, on the fifth morning I found myself waken up again at 1:30 a.m. I came to the living room and asked their friends, one male and one female, to leave. It was much easier for me to do it the second time. But they refused to leave and ignored me.

I put on my clothes and went downstairs to call campus security in the hope that they would interfere. Instead they directed me to HRA on call and told me to wait for her. I had no idea who was this HRA, but was glad to know that I might get some help.

I sat down on one of the couches in Hub mall and looked around. There was nobody else in sight in the mall. It was so quiet out there without daytime's hustle and bustle. Who would take a walk in a mall in the middle of the night, any ways?

I waited and waited, but nobody came. It was already 3:30 a.m. I went upstairs to my bedroom and could not go back to sleep. So I turned on the light and did some reading until my eyes became sore and went to bed.

The following morning, Paula and I went to the Hub life office and complained about our two-week nightmare. The lady at the front desk asked us to submit a letter of complaint to the HRA of our zone to see if he could make our situations improved. So we did.

Meanwhile, the situation in our unit worsened. Between October 13 and October 18, there were always two or three strangers staying overnight, male or female, sleeping in the living room for the whole week. The garbage bin kept piling up with their pizza boxes and food leftovers, cigarette-ends and empty whisky bottles. The two sinks were filled with

their dirty dishes and Paula and I had to remove all of them in order to wash ours. The bathtub became filthy so quickly with so many people using it that I could no longer take hot baths. As a matter of fact, for the remaining five months in that horribly dirty place I only took showers. In order to allow their friends to enter our unit with ease, Sally and Ruth not only unlocked the main door, but also left a note on the door, telling their friends that it was open and that their rooms were upstairs.

It was too much for Paula and me. So we decided to talk to them again on Sunday, October 18. We reminded them that it was a non-smoking unit and that their friends could only visit and stay for a maximum of two weeks per term and that between 11 p.m. and 8 a.m. was quiet time according to the residence regulations. We told them that from then on, Paula and I would use the left sink and they would use the right one and that we would throw our own garbage and they were responsible for theirs and that the unit door should remain locked at all time and that nobody would answer the door between 11 p.m. and 8 a.m.

On Monday, October 19, Paula and I went to see this HRA, which stood for Hub Residence Assistant, a Ph. D student. I asked Paula to recount our terrible experiences to him because I knew I might become so angry that I could not finish it. He took some notes and promised to look into this matter. He would ask Sally and Ruth to come and tell their side of the story. He assured us that "the Hub Community Association (HCA) is not a toothless organization!" before we left the HCA office.

Paula and I were greatly relieved at the thought that finally justice would be done and that these two girls would behave properly very soon. We never broke the rules. They did. Therefore, they should be punished in one way or another. Maybe they would be evicted from this unit.

Two days later, Sally and Ruth received a letter, asking them to go to the HCA office for a talk. They did not go. On Friday, Paula and I got a letter from him, saying that our roommates did not show up for the meeting and that he could only suggest that we sit down and talk to one another to solve our problems.

Early Monday morning, October 26, Paula and I went to the Hub life office to submit our request forms for transfer to other residences on campus. However, we were told that a transfer would be considered only after we had lived in Hub for four months! It was in the middle of winter and neither of us had access to vehicles to help us move. We decided to settle down and face the reality. We agreed to move out at the same time when spring came.

In order to avoid further conflicts, I packed my lunch and dinner in the morning and stayed in my office most of the time. I took a nap on the big couch in the department lounge in the afternoon so that I could study till late at night. The department secretaries knew my story and one of them, Barb Keppy, lent me a pillow. Some of my fellow graduate students offered their help and suggestions. Words of encouragement and friendly gestures meant a lot to me in those freezing months in a foreign land.

Looking back, the good side of the story was that I lost weight, ten pounds within two months. The bad side was that I suffered from sleep disorder. By early December I found myself waking up automatically at two or three o'clock in the morning and could not go back to sleep until five or six, when Sally and Ruth were cooking and eating their meals. I could never tell whether it was their dinner, lunch or breakfast.

I stopped calling those HRA's in the middle of the night when I realized that they were also students at the U of A. What was the point of waking others up? I was waken up and could not easily go back to sleep myself. Let them have a peaceful sleep if they could.

One Friday evening in November, I was so tired that I really needed a good sleep. So I carried my blanket and pillow into the department lounge and planned to spend the night there. No matter how hard I tried, I could not go to sleep. Tears filled my eyes when I lay down on the couch, perhaps the 99th time, thinking to myself, "Are you crazy? Why don't you just give up and go back to China to take care of your two-year old daughter? What's the point of pursuing this degree at such a high cost? Do you really need this degree in the first place? ..."

Tossing and turning on the couch for an hour or so, I listened to the noise of the ventilation fans in the building and the passing cars outside in the hope that these noises would bore me to sleep. But I failed. Around mid-night, I got up from the couch and headed for my bedroom in Hub.

Having lived in Hub for five months and 18 days, Paula and I finally moved out of that unit in mid-March, 1999. Later we heard that Sally and Ruth had new roommates monthly in the summer. We could never understand why the management did not evict them or move them to a two-bedroom unit to solve the problem once and for all. I could never understand why they came to the U of A in the first place. They seldom went to classes, hardly studied and often dropped courses. When exams came, they went to the hospital or clinic to ask for deferrals. Out of five exams Sally asked for three deferrals! Each deferral cost her CND $ 28.00. They had part time jobs in stores to earn some money, but their parents paid their tuition and living expenses. During that five months and 18 days I always wondered if their parents knew what they were doing at the U of A...

I have told and retold this story many times to my friends and colleagues in order to make sense of it for the past two years. When I first told it to one of my close friends, I felt outraged and frustrated, thinking to myself, "How come in a democratic country like Canada, when someone violates the rules and regulations, they are not punished accordingly?" At that time, I really hated those two girls.

They had made my life so miserable and difficult. However, as time went by, I was surprised to notice that I came to understand this story in a different way after so many retellings. As I am writing it now, I no longer hate them. I realize that the conflicts and tensions between us were inevitable since we come from different cultural backgrounds and we have different values and beliefs and ways of doing things. Mine is not necessarily more appropriate than theirs. By imposing my own value judgement on their behaviors, I failed to understand the situation I was in. I was encountering a culture so different from my own that I felt very uncomfortable and I blamed them for all my sufferings. Instead of looking for other alternatives to leave that unit as quickly as possible, I stubbornly believed that "justice" should be done to those who broke the rules and that there should be some authority I could turn to and solve the "problem" for me. When things did not work out the way I had expected, I thought the whole system was failing!

Through telling and retelling this story, I have learned to view my past experiences in an altered way. This has helped me to gain new insights and understandings into my past experiences, which will help me to shape my future life in a new direction.

At the same time, I started to see clearly the possibility of using stories as a tool for conducting research on myself and as a methodology for my research study.

What Is Narrative Inquiry?

Narrative is defined by the Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English (Allen, 1990) as "a spoken or written account of connected events in order of happening" (p. 788). To narrate means to "give a continuous story or account of" (p. 788). Egan (1986) states that "[t]he story form is a cultural universal; everyone everywhere enjoys stories" (p. 2). Barbara Hardy (as cited in McEwan & Egan, 1995) also observes that we "dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and live by narrative" (p. vii). Thus I understand that Egan's (1986) "story" is equal to Hardy's "narrative". However, Connelly and Clandinin (1991) make a distinction between "story" and "narrative". For them, "story" refers to anecdotes of specific situations, just like the small pieces of a jigsaw puzzle and "narrative" refers to long-term life events, the whole picture of that jigsaw puzzle. Therefore, narrative is a continuous storytelling of connected anecdotes in order of happening.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) believe that people by nature live storied lives and tell stories of their lives all the time and that human experience is basically storied experience. Thus, storytelling or narrative is a natural human phenomenon. Meanwhile, it is also "a way of knowing and ... a way of organizing and communicating experience" (McEwan & Egan, 1995, p. xii). In fact, the word "narrative, to narrate", has its root in the Latin gnoscere, noscere "to know".

Egan (1986) states that "[t]elling a story is a way of establishing meaning" (p. 37). Polkinghorne (1988) says that narrative serves to

> give form to the understanding of a purpose to life and to join everyday actions and events into episodic units. It provides a framework for understanding the past events of one's life and for planning future actions (p. 11).

In a similar vein, Mattingly (1991) writes,

> Stories not only give meaning to experiences we have already lived through. They also provide us a forward glance, helping us anticipate meaningful shapes for situations even before we enter them, allowing us to envision endings from the very beginning (p. 237).

Therefore, as human beings, we make meaning of our experiences of the world by telling and retelling stories, that is, through narrative. Narrative is central to the understanding of human experience (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000), in their most recent book *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research,* define "narrative inquiry" as

> ...a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people's lives, both individual and social. Simply stated, ...narrative inquiry is stories lived and told (p. 20).

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) use the term "story" to refer to the phenomenon of lived stories and the term "narrative" to refer to the inquiry or method (story telling). Thus, I understand narrative inquiry as <u>both</u> stories of human experience (phenomenon) and a method of construction and reconstruction, interpretation and reinterpretation of those experiences. When we tell and retell our life's stories, we interrelate each segment of those stories through a narrative in order to see our lives in a broader sense. We respond to the whole and reflect on

the meaning of our experiences to understand ourselves and the world around us (Yeom, 1996, p. 35).

We can live through our experiences and not learn much from them. Storytelling and retelling seem to be a powerful research method to help us make meaning from our experiences. Mattingly (1991) helps me think about how the process of sharing our stories encourages us to become more aware of ourselves, of who we are, of where we came from, and of what we are going to do in the future. Because our realities are "socially" constructed, we rely on those around us to help us understand ourselves. As van Manen (1984) observes, in telling our own story of lived experience, we know that our experiences are also the possible experiences of others. Coles (1989) also espouses that the stories of other people, written or spoken, can lead us to a deeper understanding of ourselves. Hence, he advocates that an important part of our lives should be spent listening to the stories of others and reciprocating with our own tales (Kluczny, 1998).

Therefore, like Coles (1989), I felt that it was very important for me as a researcher to encourage the four students, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose, to tell and retell their own stories so that they could process their own experiences, and learn to pull together the fragmented pictures of their lives and set direction for their future.

Narrative Research With Four Students

The process of narrative inquiry consists of three stages. In the first stage, as narrative inquirers start their research relationships with their participants, they

need to work through several key areas in order to gain entry into their research fields--they need to negotiate relationships, purposes, transitions, and ways to be useful. In the second stage, also called data collection, narrative inquirers compose their field texts--narrative accounts of their experiences and their participants'. There are several ways and a variety of sources that narrative inquirers can use to gather their data, such as field notes, participant observation, research interviews, and documents. In the third stage, also referred to as data analysis and interpretation, narrative inquirers code the data, sort them out, and look for patterns and themes in order to determine the meaning of the data. They usually write tentative interpretations and share them with their participants several times until the final research texts emerge.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) call these three stages: *being in the field (walking into the midst of stories), from field to field texts (being in a place of stories), and from field texts to research texts (making meaning of experience).*

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) never intend that narrative inquiry be a set of separate, distinct and linear procedures that narrative inquirers should follow. Instead, the process of doing narrative inquiry is always multi-layered and recursive. However, as a beginning narrative inquirer, I found it helpful to follow these three stages systematically. For the remainder of this chapter I will describe the process of my research journey with the four Chinese students--Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose--following this research framework.

Stage One: Being in the Field (Walking into the Midst of Stories)

As narrative researchers begin their inquiries, they always find themselves "in the midst--located somewhere along the dimensions of time, place, the personal, and the social" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 63). Both researchers and participants enter the inquiry field in the midst of living their stories. Participants' lives do not begin the day researchers arrive nor do they end as researchers leave. Their lives begin before the research and continue thereafter.

When I met Jasmine and Rose on the U of A campus in mid-September 1999, I was in the second year of my master's program, still passionate about my original project, which was to introduce a learner-centered approach into the teaching and learning of English in Chinese classrooms. However, at the same time I was open to other research possibilities. Jasmine and Rose, as well as Magnolia and *Mei*, were all admitted into their undergraduate programs at the U of A and were happy that finally their dreams of going to university came true.

Before my research project began, I, the researcher, and my participants-- Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose-- were friends. After they invited me to their place to celebrate the Chinese mid-Autumn Festival, we decided to meet regularly. Sometimes we went shopping together. At other times we cooked and ate together. If we had time we went to the gym to do some exercises. We practiced speaking in English, but most of the time we just talked in Chinese, sharing our stories of growing up in China and our present studies in Canada. Thus we had already engaged in living and telling our stories of ourselves. To use Clandinin and Connelly's terms, I began my research project with my participants "in the middle

of a nested set of stories" (ibid. p. 63). As I began my research work with them, "we began to tell and live new stories. Within the inquiry field, we lived out stories, told stories of those experiences, and modified them by retelling them and reliving them" (ibid. p. 71).

When a narrative research project begins, researchers need to constantly negotiate, constantly reevaluate, and maintain "flexibility and openness to an ever-changing landscape" (ibid. p. 71). They need to work through several forms of negotiations.

Negotiating relationships. Shortly after I met Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose, we started our weekly session of English conversation practice. As time went by, we knew one another better and an intimate relationship was developed. "We girls trust you, Lisa! You are our friend and mentor!" they once told me. In those weekly conversations, we shared stories of our lives in both China and Canada, but most of our stories centered around our schooling experiences in the two countries. When I started to feel vaguely where these conversations were leading me, I told them that I wanted to write something about me and them. At that time, I had no idea what my research focus would be, but they were excited when I invited them to share their stories with me on my research journey. This friendship-based research relationship played a very important part in the whole research process.

Negotiating purposes. In narrative inquiry, researchers find themselves continually explaining what they are trying to do. "One soon discovers (if one pays close attention to these explainings) that one is never too clear on what one is up

to" (ibid. p. 73). Because of my personal narrative history, at the beginning of this study, I was very much interested in the role that the English language played in these four students' adjustment process into the Canadian culture. What language difficulties did they experience? How did they cope with them? Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose wanted to know ways to improve their English proficiency quickly so that they could study more efficiently. Later, I found that my interest shifted to the comparison between the Chinese and Canadian school cultures. What were the similarities and differences between these two cultures? Why did they feel very uncomfortable in a Canadian classroom during the first month or two? On different occasions, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose asked me whether I was getting what I wanted and if "it was helpful". "As the explaining takes place, clarification and shaping of purpose occurs" (ibid. p. 73). Finally, I realized that what I really wanted to explore was their overall transitional experiences of studying and living in a new culture. Clearly purposes were negotiated over time and changed to meet the needs of all participants.

Negotiating Transitions. In narrative inquiry, researchers need to negotiate many transitions as they move from field to field texts to research texts. The most dramatic transitions are the beginnings and endings. Above, I described negotiating the beginnings.

> Though highly variable from person to person and place to place, narrative inquiries do end, at least in a formal sense. Reports are written, dissertations written, people move, funding stops (ibid. p. 74).

This negotiating of the final transition is "critical to the trust and integrity of the work that researchers do not simply walk away when 'their time has come'" (ibid.

p. 74). In my case, the research relationship may come to an end, but our friendship remains. We still meet one another often, talk over the phone for half an hour once in a while, and get together for good food, relaxation, and entertainment occasionally. I feel a commitment to them and am happy and willing to help them get through their studies for the years to come. Obviously this negotiation of exit was extremely important to the quality relationship between the researcher and the participants.

Negotiating a Way to be Useful. During the early days in the field, it is important for researchers to find a place in the field. "One can be 'there' and feel like one does not quite belong" (ibid. p. 75). However, during my research journey, I always felt that I could play a part in the "field". I was there when Rose needed a listener. I was there when Jasmine wanted some advice on her English essay writing. I was there when Magnolia panicked that she could not hand in her chemistry report on time because she could not print it out. I was there when *Mei* needed a partner to play badminton with.

Because Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei*, Rose and I share the same Chinese language and culture and because we all moved from China to Canada for further studies in 1998, I was an "insider" for them. Through our common cultural background I could help them understand their new environment. Sometimes we went shopping together. Sometimes we cooked and ate together. This intimate involvement enabled me to "grasp the huge number of events and stories, the many twisting and turning narrative threads" (ibid. p. 77) that were/are "at work in the

moment-by-moment relationships and happenings" (ibid. p. 76) and "taken-for-grantedness" (ibid. p. 76) between me and my participants.

Though narrative inquiry is often associated with story recording and telling, it is "much more than 'look for and hear story'. Narrative inquiry in the field is a form of living, a way of life" (ibid. p. 78). In my case, narrative inquiry is "trying to make sense of life as lived (ibid. p. 78). I not only told stories of myself and my participants, but also recorded "actions, doings, and happenings, all of which are narrative expressions" (ibid. p. 79).

As researchers begin work on a research project, they and their participants are beginning to author a new story, a story of growth and transformation in the life stories of both the researchers and their participants. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) caution that

> ...difficult as it may be to tell a story, the more difficult but important task is the retelling of stories that allow for growth and change....in the construction of narratives of experience, there is a reflexive relationship between living a life story, telling a life story, retelling a life story, and reliving a life story (p. 71).

Composing field texts is one way of telling and living, retelling and reliving a life story, which helps the researcher make meaning from those stories. It is extremely necessary for narrative inquirers to construct field texts all the time as field texts can "aid the inquirer to move back and forth between full involvement with participants and distance from them" (ibid. p. 80).

Stage Two: From Field to Field Texts (Being in a Place of Stories)

Field texts, the data of narrative inquiry, are "created, neither found nor discovered, by participants and researchers in order to represent aspects of field experience" (ibid. p. 92). Composing field texts is an interpretive process, during which both researchers and their participants are selective, consciously or less consciously, about what turns up in field texts. Writing field texts also expresses the relationship of researcher to participant in that "[t]he field texts created may be more or less collaboratively constructed, may be more or less interpretive, and may be more or less researcher influenced" (ibid. p. 95).

There are a variety of field texts that narrative inquirers can employ and interweave in their research: autobiographical writing; journal writing; field notes; letters; conversations; research interviews; family stories; documents; photographs, memory boxes, and other personal-family-social artifacts; and life experience (ibid. p. 93).

In my research study, I chose to use the following kinds of field texts:

Autobiographical writing as field text. When I took a course with Dr. Jean Clandinin, she encouraged all the course participants to start narrative inquiry by writing an autobiography to search for their narrative beginnings of their research puzzles. I did find mine in the process! My transitional experience in the first month of my master's studies in Edmonton reminded me of an earlier childhood experience, when I moved from my grandmother's big and spacious countryside house to a small and crowded city apartment in China. The link is that at both times I experienced "culture shock" (Oberg, 1960; see also Adler, 1975; Adler,

1991; Barna, 1998; Bennett, 1977; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Harris, 1985). "Autobiographical writing is a way to write about the whole context of a life" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 101). Through reading my stories, even though only selected pieces of my life experience, readers will learn something about my family life, something about the living conditions in Shanghai at that time, something about my parents both working full-time, and so forth. However, Clandinin and Connelly remind narrative inquirers to "recognize that any piece of autobiographical writing is 'a particular reconstruction of an individual's narrative, and there could be other reconstructions'" (as cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 101).

Journal writing as field text. I had kept journals for many years as a reflection on my life as a daughter, a student, a teacher, a wife, and a mother. However, keeping a research journal was different. During my research journey, I kept my journal whenever I felt that I needed to write about my feelings, thoughts, reactions, and questions after I talked with my participants or something happened in their lives or my own life. It helped me to better understand myself as a researcher, a teacher, a student, and above all, as a human being. It also helped me to gain insights into their situations, which in turn helped to strengthen our relationships. However, even though I recognized the power of journal writing, I did not ask Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose to keep a journal for me for two reasons. First, they were very busy with their course work, assignments, and exams. I felt it would be an extra burden for them as they already had a very tight class schedule. Sometimes they had to stay up until two or three o'clock in the

morning in order to finish reading articles or writing essays. Second, writing journals in the English language would be too demanding and time-consuming for them as their language abilities were still limited.

Conversations as field text. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note that "conversations are marked by equality among participants and by flexibility to allow participants to establish forms and topics appropriate to their group inquiry" (p. 108). Because of the nature of my research puzzles, on-going conversations with my participants played a very significant part in the data collection process. We spent two or three hours every Saturday afternoon during the months of October, November and December of 1999, talking about our schooling experiences in both China and Canada. All the conversations were tape-recorded and later transcribed. The transcripts were shared for accuracy.

Then, based on the transcripts as well as the content of our informal conversations, I would write a constructed story or stories about their experiences and send it or them back to Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose via electronic mail to confirm the accuracy of my accounts. Because of our different class schedules, it was difficult for me to meet all of them at the same time for discussion. So we decided to do it via e-mail as this would allow them to read and give me feedback when they had time. This proved to be a convenient and efficient means of communication. I would make all of the changes they requested. Sometimes they would write me or tell me more stories around the topics.

Stage 3: From Field Texts to Research Texts (Making Meaning of Experience)

As narrative inquirers move from field texts to research texts, they need to find a way to select and fit together the various kinds of field texts into an overall narrative text (ibid. p. 139). That is, they need to "hold different field texts in relation to other field texts" (ibid. p. 131) in order to construct a "chronicled or summarized account of what is contained within different sets of field texts" (ibid. p. 131). They may find themselves reading and rereading field texts for many hours to look for "the patterns, narrative threads, tensions, and themes either within or across an individual's experience and in the social setting" (ibid. p. 132) in order to make meaning of their experiences.

In my research study, after all field texts were coded and sorted by type (Personal journal, E-mail messages, Transcripts, etc.), by person (J, *Mei*, M, or R) and by date, I developed narrative accounts from those sources. These accounts were then shared with my participants. For the most part, this was done through e-mailing back and forth with my participants. Based on their feedback, I revised those accounts and then sent them back to them again for response. Through several cycles of such interactions, meanings were clarified and the inquiry continued.

Then, I read and reread those accounts and found the recurring narrative threads which were important for the students and myself (such as homesickness, language difficulty and financial concern). These narrative threads became a filter, which allowed me to examine the students' transitional experiences. When I

reconstructed stories of each student's transitional experiences, it made possible for me to examine the continuity of the students' learning experiences (Yeom, 1996).

John Dewey (as cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) holds that "one criterion of experience is continuity, namely, the notion that experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences" (p. 2). Because present experience builds upon previous experience we cannot understand present experience without knowing what came before. How the four students, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose, construct their meaning in Canada is rooted in their experience in China. Therefore, in order to understand the students' transitional experience we need to understand their experience in China and then follow them into Canada.

In chapter three, I will tell stories of Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose in their Chinese high schools in order to help readers understand their experiences and who they were in China. In chapter four, I will tell stories of Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose in a Canadian high school and in chapter five I will tell stories of their experiences in a Canadian university. I will end each of these three chapters by writing a personal reflection on my research questions to make sense of their experiences. In Chapter six, some suggestions and recommendations to both parents and educators in China and educators in Canada will be offered in the form of three letters.

Chapter Three Being Told What To Do: High school experience in China

Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose were born around 1980, when the Chinese government officially adopted the one-child policy. Except Rose, who has an elder sister, the other three students are each the only child of their respective families. They were called a new generation of *xiao huang di* ("little emperors"), whose lives were taken very good care of by their parents. When they started school, their lives were again arranged and taken care of by parents and teachers so well that the only thing they had to do was what they were told! They did not have to do any housework. All their time and energy were directed to study school subjects in order to get sufficient marks to go to the best elementary school, the best junior high school, the best senior high school and in the end, the best university, which would ensure them better jobs after graduation.

Marks

For Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose, the senior high school years were the most critical as they had to sit for the annual life-or-death National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) at the end of their three years of studies. Their marks on the NCEE would determine which university they could go to, which area of study they could apply for and ultimately what job they could find in their future. As a result, their high school days in China were filled with endless exercises and homework as their main purpose was to pass the NCEE in order to go to university. Every morning they got up and went to school to have four

. classes. After lunch there were another two classes. For each class they were assigned considerable amount of homework and they usually had to do their homework until late at night.

Mei recounted her high school experience, which was typical for a Chinese high school student:

> I had a very tough time in high school. I had to study Monday through Friday from 6:00 a.m. to 12:00 mid-night, during which I stayed in school with my classmates from 7:00 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Even Saturday and Sunday mornings, we still had to go to school!
>
> Senior high school years were very important for us because our marks on the school subjects would determine our future lives. If we could get sufficient marks on the National College Entrance Examination, we would go to top universities, which would ensure us better jobs after graduation. Therefore, we were under great pressures from our parents, our teachers, and even ourselves to excel in our academic studies. We had to always focus our attention and time on the school subjects. We did not have any free time to develop our personal interests, such as drawing, dancing, and other non-academic activities.

Magnolia echoed *Mei* in saying that:

> I had no time to do what I wanted because I spent so much time in school. I had wished that I could have time to take a walk, to go to the ocean, to write something, or even to talk to my parents and have some communication with my friends, but I had no time.

And Rose complained that:

> the questions/problems about our school subjects were very difficult to figure them out. We had to spend a lot of time on them. There were so many problems/questions that our homework just seemed endless.

As for Jasmine, her high school experience was a bit different from the other three students. Her parents sent her to a boarding school in order to raise her

marks on the school subjects so that she could have a better chance of going to university.

> My high school was a boarding school in the countryside. It was a very strict school. I went to that school because the rate of going to university was very high. I didn't like that school very much, but I regained my confidence in that school because my scores on exams were very low when I first came to that school. After three years' hard work, they were improved and I had my confidence back. This was due to the school atmosphere. All the students were studying and I had to work hard too. We got up at 5:20 in the morning and went out for jogging. At six o'clock we began our morning self-study and then we had breakfast. We started our first class at seven and studied till 9:30 in the evening. We had no time to think about other non-school-related things.
>
> I did not like the teachers there because of their manners and the way they treated the students: they beat students; they did not treat students fairly; and in the hot summer months we could only take showers twice a week. Nor did I like the strange rules in that school. There were lots of rules. For example, in spring and summer, we were asked to catch mice in our living-room and bedrooms and to catch a certain number of flies to hand in every week. They made this rule in order to keep the whole school clean. We had mice in our bedrooms. They came to our beds and ate our food. Three students shared two beds and all the beds were joined together.

When *Mei* commented that Jasmine's high school was just like a jail, Jasmine disagreed.

> Although I did not like some aspects of that school, I really appreciated the time I had spent there. I began to understand my mother and found out that she really cared for me and loved me.
>
> I did not get along with my mother in my junior high school. She was very rude to me whenever I got bad marks on my exams. I felt oppressed and was unhappy. I used to be a very good student in elementary school, but when I went to junior high school, I became very common since there were many good students there.
>
> My marks went sharply down and I became a silent student in my class all day long. In fact, I was so lack of confidence that I even did not dare to make friends with my classmates.
>
> My mother always required me to be a top student, but I always disappointed her in my junior high years. In fact, I even failed to reach the minimum requirement mark on the Junior High School Leaving Exam in order to go to a senior high school. Fortunately, the fact that I could play the piano helped me to get additional marks so that I could go to senior

high school. Because of that, my mother was more disappointed about me and I thought that she even felt ashamed of me. I was no longer a beautiful white swan, but a small ugly duckling in my junior high school.

However, when I went to that boarding school, my mother no longer cared too much about my marks because the majority of the students there were academically very strong. Instead, she always encouraged me to try my best. She came to visit me every weekend. Perhaps she was happy that I could stand the bad living conditions and strict school regulations and rules there. I was happy, too. I had some freedom to deal with my own feelings and thoughts without her control.

Because I did not feel pressured and I studied very hard every day, my marks on the exams became better and better. As a result, I gained my confidence back.

While listening to Jasmine's high school experience, I could not help thinking about my own. My parents chose to send me to live in my senior high school for the same reason: to concentrate on my studies in order to get sufficiently high marks to go to university.

It was an elite school and students from other far-away districts in the city would stay during the week and go home at weekend.

It was the first time I left home and lived on my own. I knew I needed a lot of self-control and discipline to make the most out of it. So, right from the start, I established some daily routines for myself. Every morning I got up at 5:30 and went to the playground for jogging. I always took my mini portable radio with me so that I could listen to the English teaching and learning programs on air while doing exercises. After having breakfast at 6:30, I would go straight into the classroom and did morning self-study until 8 o'clock when the first class of the day started. We had four classes in the morning and two in the afternoon. I spent the rest of the afternoon finishing my homework or going to the school library to read books and magazines. The evening self-study started right after dinner at 6:30 in the school library, where a librarian, a very serious-looking lady in her forties, was in charge of us, about sixty students who lived in the school during the week. She made sure that every student was studying.

I had my reward for my diligence. I graduated from that high school with high marks on all my school subjects. As a matter of fact, I scored among the top ten students in my class on the annual National College Entrance Examination in July 1985 and was admitted to one of the finest universities in China.

Marks played such an important part in students' lives in China that their self-worth, self-esteem and self-confidence were defined by their marks in schools. They were "good students" in the eyes of their parents, their teachers and even themselves only when they could obtain good marks on their report cards. Like Jasmine, who lost her self-confidence in her junior high school because of her low marks, Magnolia and I both suffered from the loss of our self-confidence when we went to our senior high schools. Though a decade apart, Magnolia's experience resonated with my own.

Lisa:

> Because of my high marks on the Municipal Senior High School Entrance Examination, I left my non-elite junior high school and entered an elite senior high school in Shanghai with high expectations and a bright future in my mind. I even sat on the student committee, in charge of the social events and activities of the class. However, I soon realized that I needed to work harder on my studies as the majority of my classmates had spent their junior high school years in the same high school. Though we learned the same subjects, they studied them in more depth and width. I had a lot to catch up with.
>
> However, no matter how hard I tried, I had difficulty with physics and chemistry and math and most of my marks were below 60. By the end of first term, I lost all my self-confidence. My English and Chinese remained at the top of the class, but that could not save me. I talked to my home class teacher and the chairperson of the student committee that I would resign from my position. I told them that they should find a better committee member than me.
>
> I did not improve much in the second term of grade 10. To make matters worse, I started to build walls around myself. I had no confidence that my classmates would want to make friends with me, so I just avoided them. Only one girl managed to break my walls and we became good friends and have remained so up till now.
>
> At that time, it was a norm that by the end of grade 10 students would either select or be recommended by their home class teachers to study either Arts or Sciences according to their academic performances on related subject areas. Students then would spend two years, grade 11 and 12, preparing for the National College Entrance Examination, which was held once a year in early July.

If a student chose Arts, it was generally assumed that s/he could not do well in sciences. The following saying was very popular then: *Xue Hao Shu Li Hua, Zou Bian Tian Xia Dou Bu Pa* ("Study Math, Physics and Chemistry well and you can get whatever job you want"). No student wanted to study Arts if there was a slim chance that s/he could study sciences in university.

Without any doubt, I chose the route to Arts. I could not survive in the science world in any way. In my high school, there were 6 classes in one grade and each class had 42 students. However, we had only one Arts class with 40 students for grade 11 and 12.

I was pleased to get rid of physics and chemistry for good, but I had to study math, as math would still be included in the 6 test subjects. The other five were Chinese, English, Geography, History and Politics. The majority of test items in those subject areas required rote learning and I was good at memorization. So I found them easy to study. As I regained my confidence in my studies, I started to break those walls which isolated me from others. I had more and more friends.

Magnolia:

I had been very successful from elementary school to junior high. In fact, I was among the best ones. However, after I went to the senior high, I failed completely in the first year. During the physics, chemistry and math classes I wanted to sleep. I was only good at Chinese. My English was so-so. You can't imagine how bad my marks were on my physics, chemistry and math. So I lost my confidence because I was so excellent before. It was a turning point in my life. It was really hard and I could not face the reality at that time.

In grade 11, we were allowed to choose either the Arts route or the Science route. I chose the Arts. When I first moved to this Arts class, I wanted to go back to my Science class. I wasn't sure what I was able to do in that class. I couldn't find my place there. I was still in the shadow of failure of my grade 10. But two weeks later, everything was new for me. I was elected to sit on the class committee, in charge of the hygiene of the class. I worked very hard. Sometimes I did many things all by myself without telling anybody else. Somehow someone was watching and later my home class teacher knew about it.

In that year I studied very well and I regained my self-confidence for two main reasons. First, I was very interested in arts, history and Chinese. I could handle them very well and with ease. Second, my home class teacher was very close to us. Because she was young we never called her Teacher ____, but just her name. She taught us in the manner as if we were friends. We could learn from each other and we could tell her what was on our minds. She was very friendly. That helped me to go through

> that horrible period of my life. I was able to complete my high school successfully.

Lack of Time and Freedom

The more time students spent on school subjects and in schools, the less time they had for their own personal interests, or even their own thoughts. As a matter of fact, even if they had been given the freedom and time to cultivate their interests other than school subjects, they would have felt guilty because they were "playing and wasting their precious time". They knew how much their parents had done for their education.

Parental Sacrifices

Knowing that their parents were frugal in family spending in order to save money for their future education, students in China had no choice but to study hard. Jasmine recalled what her parents had done for her education.

> My mother did not have the chance to go to university because of the *Wen Hua Da Ge Ming* ("Grand Cultural Revolution", 1966-1976) although she was very smart and hard-working. Therefore, she has very high expectations of me and hopes that I can fulfil her dream. My family is not rich, but my mother is good at saving money. She has spent a lot of money on me and my education without the slightest hesitancy. She bought me a piano when I was only six years old. She found a tutor to teach me how to play the piano for ten years. She sent me to the boarding school so that I could concentrate on my studies.

Jasmine's story brought forth my own memory of what my parents have done for me.

> In order to help me with my studies when I went to a non-elite junior high school, my parents bought two "luxuries"; a nine-inch black and white TV set and later an imported Sanyo mono tape-recorder. I still

remember the sensations it stirred up in our old neighborhood when my father carried that small TV set home on his bike. It was just after the Grand Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when consumer goods were very scarce. In fact, it was among the first TV sets that a Shanghai factory produced after the Grand Cultural Revolution. I remember that after dinner, some neighbors would come to our 14X14 square meter room to enjoy a very limited number of TV shows.

That TV set gave me extra help with my studies. I remember every day after school I would come home, sit on a small stool and pull a bigger one in front of me so that I could take notes while listening to the lectures of different school subjects on TV. My favorite TV educational program was, of course, an English teaching and learning TV series called *Follow Me*. I still remember the TV hostess' name, Catherine Flower, a British lady, who led me into the world of English language and its people as I followed her every other day.

While my parents did not hesitate to buy the black-and-white TV set, it took them quite a while to make the decision to buy that Sanyo mono tape-recorder, a very expensive imported commodity at that time, when a neighbor, a junior high school English teacher, offered my father the certificate because he himself could not afford it. I remember its price was RMB $220 and the tapes cost RMB $5.50 each. (In fact, it would be easier for them to give me US $20,000 now than to spend that amount of money then.) At that time, with RMB $0.10 we could buy two pounds of vegetables.

My parents' monthly salary was RMB $54 then. It meant two month's total family income for them. My parents finally bought the tape-recorder and five tapes for me. Perhaps they saw my love for languages, perhaps they believed that it would pay off in the long run, perhaps... I could never figure out. But I knew they always believed that investment in the education of their children was worthwhile.

I still kept that old model of Sanyo tape-recorder and the five tapes in my desk drawer back in Shanghai though I hardly used them any more. They had been my companions for eight years until my parents bought me another radio/tape-recorder when I was a third-year university student. I will never throw them away because they are a constant reminder of how much my parents have done for me.

My Reflection on the Research Question

Because of the one-child policy and parental sacrifices and because of the examination-oriented education system, in order to move ahead Chinese students had to go through a very rigorous selection process, during which marks on

examinations were the only criteria of academic success. Obtaining high marks became their only goal in school. They were told to study, study and study by parents, teachers, and even themselves. They had no time or freedom for any non-school-related activities.

The rigid Chinese school system valued "rote learning, keen competition and examination" (Sheh, 1994, p. 15), which led to many students' lack of intellectual curiosity, unwillingness to discuss academic problems, and a tendency to cling to the authority of the teachers and the printed texts (Sheh, 1994, p. 15). Chinese students were passive learners and had little control over their studies or lives. When some of these students came to Canada for their further education, they experienced adjustment problems while studying in a vastly different education system and culture.

Chapter Four Not Knowing What To Do: High school experience in Canada

While the biggest issues to Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose in China were obtaining high marks in school, lacking freedom and time to do what they wanted and having parental sacrifice and pressure to excel academically, very different obstacles appeared when they came to Canada in 1998 to pursue their first university degree. Disappointments and feeling empty, language difficulty, and homesickness had to be overcome during the first year of their sojourn experience.

Disappointment and Feeling Empty

In order to prepare them for a new education system and to pass the TOEFL test, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose attended a university preparation program in a high school in Edmonton after they arrived in Canada in September 1998.

However, "disappointing and empty" were the two words uttered most frequently by these four female students when I asked them about their preparation program at the high school. Having paid RMB $150,000 (CND $25,000) in China for their housing, meals and tuition for the first year and the application and handling fee, they were disappointed that they had to live in a crowded apartment. Four students shared a two-bedroom unit. The variety and quality of their meals were also "unsatisfactory" and "disappointing".

With CND $8,000 for their one-year tuition, they were disappointed to find out that they did not have an ESL teacher when the school term began in

September 1998. In the end, a teacher, who was three months pregnant, volunteered to teach them the first term. The school did find an experienced ESL teacher for the second term starting January 1999, but it was too late for them as they would sit for the TOEFL test in May. They regretted that they had wasted four months because "they did not study as hard as they should have".

Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose felt "empty" and at a loss when they studied in that high school. They had much less homework and it was much easier for them, especially math and chemistry. They could finish their homework in school. With so much time at their disposal, they did not know how to manage the time, how to fill the vast amount of time which they had yearned for so much back in China.

Jasmine's feeling of unhappiness was typical. "I was not happy. I didn't have lots of things to do and I felt empty." She said. Rose complained that,

> I wasted my money and time. I regretted that I just waste one year and did nothing. If I had known better I would have studied TOEFL in China. I think I can get a much higher mark on TOEFL that way. Teachers here are nice, but they do not know how to teach for exams.

And *Mei* reflected that,

> I don't think I learned a lot in that high school because I was lazy. I didn't work hard enough. The teacher didn't give too much homework as the Chinese teachers did.

As a matter of fact, they had so much time after homework was done that *Mei* would move her mattress to Jasmine and Magnolia's bedroom and the three of them would share their thoughts and feelings about everything till midnight every day, of course, in their mother tongue, Chinese.

Living with her cousin's family, Rose spent her spare time sleeping and daydreaming about going to university. She thought that she should have spent more time on her studies. Sometimes she did not finish her homework. Sometimes she just came home and slept.

Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose were so accustomed to have their lives arranged by parents and teachers and have their days filled with school work in China that they were at a loss what to do with their lives in a new education system.

Language Difficulty

Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose came to Canada for their first university degree. However, in order to be admitted to the U of A, they had to obtain a score of at least 580 on the TOEFL test, a language requirement for international students whose mother tongues are not English. Therefore, they devoted all their time and energy to the study of TOEFL for the second half of their first year.

When I asked them how they felt about their English when they first came to Canada, they thought that at least their grammar was acceptable. Speaking and listening were very difficult for them as they had very few opportunities to listen to or speak to native speakers back in China.

While in China, Jasmine and Rose had some intensive English courses in addition to their high school English classes. Jasmine went to Beijing to study TOEFL in a language institute. Rose once told me that,

> I took an intensive English course for one year before I came to Canada. My professor was from a local university. He taught listening and speaking.

> I had three classes every week for listening. I probably had more practice than an average high school student. At that time, I also went to an English corner (a place where people of all ages go regularly at a certain time and talk in English, usually on Saturday or Sunday, in the parks) in one of the parks in the city. However, I just listened to other people talking. I was shy and did not talk to anybody. There were some native speakers of English and many people talked to them in order to practice their English.

However, even with "extra" access to the English language in China, Jasmine and Rose were not ready to cope with using English with native speakers on a daily basis. Both of them, as well as Magnolia and *Mei*, regretted that they saw the main purpose of learning English in China as just to pass the exams, and that they had no need or desire to use English as a means of communication.

When they started their university preparation program in that high school, they were given a test on English. Most of the test items were on listening comprehension and they did poorly on that test. Magnolia was so upset about her "weak" English that she did not even feel like going to school any more. She had no confidence that she was "good enough to enter university". And Jasmine said,

> Because my English was poor I even hated to go to the classes except English and Math. I felt really awkward in those classes, especially when I was the only Chinese student who spoke broken English!

Mei and Rose both worried whether they could reach the minimum requirement score of 580 within such a short period of time.

Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose sat for their TOEFL test in May 1999 and none of them reached 580. However, they all scored above 530 and were admitted into their undergraduate programs on the condition that they should take an intensive ESL course in their first term at the U of A.

Homesickness

Except Jasmine, who went to a boarding school for three years and who was eager to leave her mother because "she always controlled my life", it was the first time for Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose to leave their parents and live on their own. They were very homesick during the first two months.

Rose:

> I lived with my mother for 20 years. This is the first time I left her so far away. It's really hard for me. For the first two months in Edmonton, I wrote so many letters to her, but half a year later I got her first letter to me! I decided to call her instead.

Magnolia:

> The second or third month I came to Edmonton I got very homesick. I cried on the phone while talking to my mother. The next day my father phoned me. He was very angry because he told me that my mother was so sad when she heard me crying on the phone. After that, I never cried over the phone.

Mei:

> I would miss my parents when I was unhappy or had difficulty with my studies. This is the first time I leave them. At home they always did everything for me. My parents thought that I could not handle it. Before my mother came to Edmonton to visit me in February 1999, she could not sleep well or eat well. She misses me very much. After she saw that I could handle, she did not worry that much any more.

While listening to their stories, I could not help thinking about my own. I still remember how homesick I was during the first two months in Jasper. Even though I was with my husband, whom I really love, I was homesick. I missed my family, especially my one-and-a-half-year-old daughter. I repeatedly thought to myself that it was a big mistake to come to Canada and that China was a better

place to be. Many a time, tears filled my eyes for no obvious reason at all. Later, when I moved to Edmonton for my master's program and had problems with my two roommates, I was even more homesick. On many occasions, I thought to myself that I should go back to China instead of living such a meaningless life in Edmonton!

Clearly, the fall of 1998 was the most difficult period for Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei*, Rose and myself as we moved to a new city in a new country to further our education. Like most international students, we experienced a range of feelings and reactions in this new culture and started to question ourselves what made us come here in the first place.

Coming from a very different culture, we had difficulty adjusting to our new environment. We had to cope with feelings of disappointments and frustrations, language difficulty, and homesickness.

My Reflection on the Research Question

At high schools in China, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose studied the same prescribed textbooks regardless of the different regions they came from. They went to classes, listened to lectures, took notes, did their homework, and passed their tests. There was so much homework to do after school and so many tests to write in school that they could not find time even to talk to their parents, let alone to play with their friends.

They were so accustomed to being told what to do in China that they did not know what to do when they found out that school days in Canada are shorter

and that students go to classes only between 8:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. Students in Canada do not worry about any entrance exams. There is no such an exam in Canada. Whether a student is eligible to go to university or not depends on his/her overall academic performance throughout their senior high school years.

Since Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose had completed their high school education in China before they came to Canada, they did not worry about their marks on math, chemistry and other school subjects while in that university preparation program in that high school. However, they were anxious about their lack of English proficiency. On the one hand, they needed to pass the TOEFL test; on the other hand, they knew their language ability would ultimately determine how well they would function in this new education system and in this new country.

As English is a foreign language in China, many Chinese students only study it as a school subject, not as a means of communication. Therefore, when these students come to English-speaking countries, they find a huge gap between what they have learned in China and the real English people here actually use.

Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose had learned English for seven years before they arrived in Canada, four years in junior high school and three years in senior high. Their teachers taught English in Chinese. Sometimes in senior high school, they used English. They were required to recite whole paragraphs from their English textbooks. English was just a subject to study. They never thought that they should be able to use it, to speak it, or to understand it. In their minds if

they could pass the exams they were doing just fine. They just memorized whatever the teacher taught them.

Lack of English language proficiency poses as one of the biggest challenges in their first year in a foreign land (Feng, 1991; Sheh, 1994; Sun & Chen, 1997). Meanwhile, they also had to adapt to a different education system in which the relationship between teachers and students and the roles of teachers and students were all vastly different from what they used to know (Arias, 1999; Brooks, 1997; Feng, 1991; Masur, 1998; Sun & Chen, 1997; Upton, 1989).

In China, teachers are seen as "all knowing, and the absolutely authority on the subject matter" (Brooks, 1997, p. 13) while students as empty receptacles, passively waiting to be filled up with knowledge (Masur, 1998). The relationship between teacher and student is very formal and rigid.

> It is the duty of the students to give utmost respect to the teacher. To ask questions of the teacher, or to question the words of a teacher is tantamount to questioning the position of the teacher, and therefore is not a feature of Chinese classrooms (Brooks, 1997, p. 13).

Therefore, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose were surprised to experience the informal and friendly atmosphere in Canadian classrooms. As a matter of fact, in spite of their disappointment and other culture-shock-related uneasiness, all of them think positively about their two ESL teachers. Jasmine said,

> the Canadian teachers were very helpful. They were very ready to help the students, not only with our study, but also with our life.

And Magnolia noticed that,

> in China, the teacher always pushed you. But here the teacher sometimes pulled you. It's help and guide, never push too hard. Let yourself decide. I like it here.

Mei really appreciated that,

> teachers here were more like friends. They were closer to their students. The atmosphere in the classroom was more informal and friendly.

And Rose commented that,

> the relationship between student and teacher is different. In China, since elementary school we have learned that we must respect teachers. Whatever teacher say is a rule. We must do it. We can't say no. For example, if a teacher says "Today you must do this" and if you say no you will get into big trouble. But in Canada teacher and student are more like friends. Students can make fun of and tell jokes about their teachers, who may be offended sometimes, but most of the time it's O.K.

While in that Canadian high school, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose also noticed that,

> the teacher in Canada tries to open our mind, to lead us to think about some questions instead of feeding us the answers and asking us to memorize them. While in China, the teacher just gave us the formula, and ask us to focus on this kind of question. We would do our homework, practice for hours, memorize this formula and then we could get high marks.

Obviously, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose were aware that there was a discrepancy between what they had known and learned in the Chinese education system and what they experienced in the Canadian high school classroom. Their assumptions about the relationship between teacher and student, the roles of teacher and student play in the learning process were challenged. They found out that they were forced to leave their comfortable shells, where everything was arranged well for them by their parents and teachers, and to enter an unknown water, where they were never sure what the future would hold for them. However,

at the same time, all of them admitted that they had become more mature persons because of this unsettling sojourn experience.

Chapter Five Learning to Know What to Do: University Experience in Canada

In moving to a high school in Canada, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose learned to overcome many challenges, such as disappointments and feelings of emptiness, language difficulty and homesickness. Their transition to university was fraught with additional challenges: financial concerns, stress of decision-making, and academic difficulties.

Financial Concerns

According to the research literature, financial difficulty tops the list of issues and concerns international students have to face while studying in a foreign country (Arias, 1999; Feng, 1991), especially for those who move from a developing country to a developed one, e.g. from China to Canada.

As for Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose coming to Canada for their post-secondary education, they found, to their astonishment, that everything in Canada is far too expensive for them: tuition, clothing, food, accommodation, and transportation. They have learned to cope with this difficult situation by starting part-time jobs for the first time in their lives.

Tuition

As international students with student visas, they have to pay 100% differential fee, which means their tuition fees are doubled as compared with that of Canadian citizens or landed immigrants. With an annual tuition fee of more

than CND $8,000 they have very little money at their disposal for their daily living expenses. (CND $1.00 = RMB $6.00. CND $8,000 means RMB $48,000. If a family could put aside RMB $500 a month it would take them eight years to save that amount of money.) So they have to learn to survive on a very tight budget.

Clothing

In China, during wintertime, a change of clothing once a week was sufficient. Only in summer, daily changing is necessary. However, because of different fashions, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose needed to change their clothes every day in Edmonton. They found out that it was very expensive to buy new clothes in Canada. Back in China they could buy good quality blouses with only RMB $60 (CND $10). Magnolia once said to me, "Can you imagine that for the first year in Edmonton the only clothing I ever bought was a dozen socks!" Rose was "sick of wearing the same clothes all the time". She felt uncomfortable when she was invited to join her friends for a social event.

Food

They learned to look out for discounts on almost everything on their weekly grocery shopping list. They learned to compare prices at different stores for the same item and always go for the bargain. With RMB $3.00 (CND $0.50) they could buy either a dozen eggs or three pounds of vegetables in China. It was no wonder that Rose told me, "I would rather walk three or four blocks farther to buy some pears, that are 20 cents per pound cheaper. Now every cent counts

here!" For them, it is a real challenge to eat healthy food on a low budget. *Mei* and Magnolia have come up with the idea that they eat together in order to have more variety in their daily diet.

Accommodation

Due to financial constraints, they also had to live in shared accommodations. It took them a lot of time to find a place they could afford. In selecting an abode, they had to take into consideration two major factors: location and rent. The place had to be within walking distance of the U of A so that they did not have to buy monthly bus passes during the warmer months. (These passes cost CND $50.00 each, which meant a whole month's salary for an average Chinese worker not long ago.) Furthermore, the rent had to be within their financial limit. These two factors usually left them with few choices.

When I first met them, Jasmine, *Mei* and Magnolia lived in an one-bedroom apartment in the basement of an apartment building, 20 minutes walking distance from the university. They paid CND $140.00 each. They put three mattresses on the floor in the bedroom and their desks occupied three corners of the living room. They did not have a TV or VCR here for quite a while. But in China, all of them had those "luxuries". Rose lived with her cousin's family for a year and a half until her efforts to get along with them failed again and again. She needed some distance and space to sort things out. So in January 2000 she decided to move into the apartment with the other young women and slept in the living room for five months before they moved to a two-bedroom apartment, not far away

from the old one, in June 2000. As it was very crowded in their apartment, most of the time they had to study in the libraries or lounges on campus.

Transportation

Except Jasmine, who can afford to buy the monthly bus passes, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose tend to walk or to bike to and from the university between the months of April and October. For the remaining five or six months they had to take the bus because the long snowy Canadian winter was just "too freezing for them to walk for more than five minutes".

> Edmonton transit system is convenient during the week, but not on weekends, especially on Sundays, when most of its bus routes operate on an hourly basis. It takes a very long time to get anywhere in the city.

Mei made this comment when she came to visit me one Sunday afternoon.

Learning to cope

In order to make their dreams of studying abroad come true, their families in China supported them financially. All of them agreed that without the money their parents had saved over the years they could never have come to Canada in the first place. However, with an annual cost of CND $8,000 for their tuition, their parents' savings could not sustain them for very long. Therefore, Rose started to work in her cousin's restaurant as soon as she arrived in Edmonton in September 1998. By the end of 1999, *Mei* and Magnolia both began to look for part time jobs and Jasmine started her first job in the fall of 2000.

Being a graduate student, I was in a slightly better financial situation than they were. I could apply for graduate assistantships at the U of A. I had worked for 10 years in China before coming to Canada, so I had some savings. My husband and my parents both supported me financially so that I could concentrate on my studies and graduate as early as possible. However, I shared with Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose that everything in Canada was expensive, especially in those early months in Edmonton. I tended to convert every Canadian dollar I spent to Chinese RMB and found out that everything, from bread to rent, was shockingly expensive for me! My assistantship only covered part of my tuition; I bought and brought all my clothes from China; I learned to look for bargains for my grocery shopping; I lived in a four-bedroom unit in Hub instead of a two-bedroom one because I could save CND $100 per month in rent; I chose to live on campus in order to save time and money travelling on buses.

As the above examples show, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei*, Rose and myself could never escape the "costs" of our limited budgets. We are constantly reminded of the fact that how expensive it is to live and study in Canada, how little money we have at our disposal, and how much our families have sacrificed in order to support our studies.

Stress of decision-making

Apart from the financial constraints they were experiencing, it was the first time ever in their lives that Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose had lived on their own. In China, students' lives in high school and university are arranged and taken

care of by parents and teachers to such a degree that the only thing students have to do is what they are told! Except Rose, who has a sister 20 years older, Jasmine, *Mei* and Magnolia are each the only child in their respective families. They were accustomed to having everything arranged for them by their parents. Their main task before coming to Canada was to study, study and study in order to get to university. They could be called the "princesses" of their family and had been taken very good care of at home by their parents. Magnolia once told me,

> every morning my mother would ask me what I would like for dinner before she went to the market. But here in Edmonton, when exams were coming, I would just eat instant noodles. I could not spare any time for cooking and eating healthy meals. That would be an extra burden to me.

Despite the fact that they lived in a sea of homework and exercises back in China, they did not have to worry about other things in their lives, the seemingly trivial aspects in their daily living, such as shopping and cooking.

They were so used to being told what to do that it really was a challenge for them to live in a foreign country on their own for the first time. They were forced to make hundreds of decisions on a daily basis that they had not been prepared for. In Canada they had to make every single decision themselves regarding every aspect of their daily lives: which bank to choose to open their account in, where to live, where to shop, how to have a telephone hooked up, what major to study in, which courses to select, to name just a few. This change certainly caused a lot of stress. In addition to experiencing disappointment, frustration, impatience, anxiety and anger, all of them, at one time or another, suffered from stress-related

physiological symptoms such as sleeplessness, stomachaches, and headaches (Adler, 1991, p. 229).

Apart from their busy schedules at the university, they had to decide how many hours a week they could work in order to still maintain an average Grade Point Average (GPA), sufficient enough to keep them in the university. Otherwise they would have visa problems with Canadian Immigration. The tension between working to earn tuition and studying to stay is ever present. Rose is a good case in point. On several occasions she told me that she had to drop some classes in order to keep her GPA high enough to stay in the university. That was very expensive for her in terms of money, time and energy. As a result, she has learned to make very careful decisions when selecting courses for her second university term.

Academic Difficulties

Before entering the U of A, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose directed all their time and energy to the study of TOEFL in that high school because that was the only obstacle on their way to the university. However, as soon as they entered the university, they found out that in addition to studying in a second language they had to adjust themselves to too many things. For example, they had to decide what majors they should study. They needed to learn the new technology in order to survive in this information age. They had to change their study styles and manage their time better so that they could keep up with the rhythm and workload of this new education system. They needed to deal with the professor-student

relations more effectively. They had to study hard in order to maintain sufficiently high GPA.

Language Difficulties

Soon after they started their university lives, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose realized that passing the TOEFL test did not help them much in their daily academic activities. They encountered more language difficulties in the areas of listening, speaking, reading and writing at the U of A.

Listening. Understanding lectures was a major concern for Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose in their first term (fall term 1999) at the university. In early October 1999, *Mei* sent me the following e-mail message:

> I always have some problems in my computer class. I can't understand what the professor is talking about and I have no confidence on it. I know I should study harder, but in fact I am tired of the course. Next week, I will have a mid-term exam. I don't know whether I can do well or not. Anyway, maybe I should pay more attention to it and I wish I could learn something in the class.

Mei's frustration of not understanding her professor in her computer class was obvious. In fact, even after going back home and reading the textbook again and again, she still could not understand the content. Only after she did the homework, could she understand a little.

"Why don't you ask your professor in class if you don't understand?" I asked *Mei*.

"Well, sometimes I ask him, but there are so many questions that I don't understand! If I ask him all the problems he will teach me the whole class." *Mei*

replied with resignation. In fact, all of these four female students shared the same feeling that going to lectures was futile. It did not help them at all. "How could I understand what the professor was talking about when I was still reading chapter 7 and he was teaching chapter 14!" Magnolia once told me in despair. Rose planned to take a mini tape-recorder to her class and tape-record the lecture so that she could listen to it again and again after class. However, she only tried it once and it failed! It so happened that she pushed the wrong button and instead of recording silently, the recorder played some loud music and the whole class laughed. She was so embarrassed that she did not dare to try again.

Speaking. Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose found it very difficult to take part in class discussions in their ESL class (Sometimes they just used Chinese!), to answer questions and ask questions in class. For one thing, they were not used to the discussion format; for another, their English ability prevented them from making any meaningful contributions to the class discussion.

In the case of Rose, who thought her listening and speaking English were better than her grammar and writing because she stayed with her cousin's family, where the language of communication was English, she later noted that it did not help very much with her academic studies.

> Once I went to my math professor and tried to ask him some questions. But he had difficulty understanding what my question was! I had to write my questions on the blackboard in order to help him understand the questions. I did not know the math terms in English to make myself understood.

What Rose said reminded me of the notion about the difference between "basic interpersonal communication skills" (BICS) and "cognitive/academic

language proficiency" (CALP) (Cummins, 1980). I told Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose that it usually takes one to two years to acquire the basic language skills and five to seven years to acquire the academic ones in order to function comfortably in a second language setting. Instead of dreaming about learning a second language in one day, they should have a long-term plan so that they would not get anxious or discouraged easily.

Reading. Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose found their reading speed very slow, especially when they were studying content in which they had no prior knowledge, e.g. computers. Sometimes they had to read the same passage in a textbook many times. At other times, they did not know some of the idiomatic expressions in English, which also caused them a lot of headaches. Once they came across the phrase "by virtue of", they looked it up in the dictionary word by word, but could not make sense of what it meant. I told them that it was a "set phrase".

In China, English is taught intensively, i.e. emphasis is put on analyzing the sentence structures and memorizing vocabulary and selected paragraphs. Therefore, students tend to read English word by word. At the back of their minds, they always look for the subject of the sentence, the verb tense, the object, and so on. This habit dramatically slows down their reading speed. What's more, they are not trained to read for main ideas, the author's attitude, or the tone of the article.

Writing. *Mei* noted that the grammar she learned in China only helped her to get high test scores. When it came to essay writing, she still found many grammar problems in her essays.

For Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose, writing essays in English posed the biggest problem in their academic life and is still a problem now. Magnolia knew her essay needed correcting, but she could not figure out what her problems were. She just had this vague feeling that somehow it did not sound like "good" English. *Mei* also asked for my advice about what she should pay more attention to in essay writing.

As a matter of fact, they all chose to major in sciences in the first term so that they would not have to take English 101, which was a very difficult course for them. In that course they would be required to read and write extensively in English. Many of their friends had failed that course just because they could not write appropriate essays in English. (Happily, Jasmine took English 101 over the summer of 2000 and passed the course. Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose are taking it in the fall and winter term 2000-2001.)

Jasmine once told me that,

> vocabulary and writing pose a big headache for us. We don't know how to use English...how to express our ideas clearly. My teacher's comments on my essays filled the whole page and I was discouraged and wondered whether I would ever improve my English writing.

In their research papers for the ESL course, their teacher often remarked that their writings were "illogical" and "incoherent". They had this tendency to jump to conclusions out of nowhere. I advised them to think the topic through

before they actually wrote about it and that whenever they made a statement or argument they should have supporting evidence. This was largely due to the difference in writing style in these two different cultures. While presenting one's ideas, a Canadian student writes directly, to the point and in a linear manner while a Chinese student's writing is indirect and implicit and tends to avoid self-expression. I also suggested that they write about their own ideas instead of guessing what the professor would like them to write about. In China, it was more important for them to get the correct answers from teachers, who did not encourage students to think critically and form their own ideas. Personal opinions are not valued in a Chinese classroom (Brooks, 1997, p. 15) as much as here in a Canadian classroom.

Choosing Majors

Apart from language difficulties, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose also had to face the challenges of studying in a new education system, where students take initiatives and make decisions for their own academic programs (Upton, 1989). Because of their backgrounds in China and because they were new to the Canadian system, it was really difficult for them to decide what they should study in the first term.

I still remember the beginning of my graduate program. When some professor or fellow student asked me what my research interest was I would just look confused. How could I know if my professor did not tell me! Soon I learned that I had to find my own research topic!

In October 1999, when I asked them what area of study they were interested in for their first university degrees, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose said that they were trying to "find" their majors! Because of their language deficiency, all of them went to the Faculty of Science at first.

Jasmine:

> I planned to take biological engineering, but there is no such major at the U of A. Now I have no idea what to choose.

Magnolia:

> I am still not sure about my area of study. At the beginning I wanted to study education, then I changed my mind and decided on business. I even thought of taking agriculture and computer science. Now I am in the Faculty of Science to study biology next year!

Mei:

> I study computer science because it is important for me to find a job easily. I have no idea what my interest is. So I choose the one that will help me find a job.

Rose:

> I have decided my goal since I was 13. I want to be a businesswoman. My major is computer science, my minor business. It's easier to find a job if I study computer. I also study economics and business.

However, at the end of 1999, they were not sure any more. Rose dropped out of her computer course at the end of the term for fear that she could not pass the final exam and that would affect her GPA. She selected a higher level course because she wanted to save money. That was a bad decision, she later told me. Computer was a brand new subject to them. They had a very hard time

understanding even the Chinese terminology, let alone the English one. Magnolia planned to drop her biology course in February 2000 when she felt that she did very poorly on her mid-term exam. She was still not sure what her major would be, but she knew she would not take biology.

As I am writing this thesis, Jasmine has been admitted to the Faculty of Engineering, doing chemical engineering while Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose are trying to get into the Faculty of Business. Magnolia and *Mei* both plan to take accounting, but Rose is still not sure what her major will be!

Learning New Technology

In addition to the language difficulties and the difficulty of choosing a major, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose had to learn many new things in their first term. They learned how to use computers to finish their assignments and lab reports, a skill which native Canadian students take for granted. They learned how to use the internet to search for useful information. They learned how to send and receive e-mails. They learned how to search the library system of the university to request and renew materials via the internet.

Study Styles and Time Management

By the end of their first term, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose had realized that they needed to change their old study methods and to manage their time better. During the term, all of them found out that they were always catching up with their studies. When exams came, they felt overwhelmed. As Jasmine put it,

> We still had our old study methods. We just reviewed what we had learned before the exams. As for me, even though I finished all the sample questions, some of them I didn't really understand. As a result, I made the same mistake on the exams. I should have studied and reviewed what I had learned more regularly instead of rushing it all just before exams. Our time-management skills were also very poor. Before the exams I studied until mid-night everyday and I was really active in my studies. I think I should study all the time instead of just doing it before the exams.

Learning to change study methods and to manage their time wisely has, in effect, forced them to discipline themselves as the Canadian teachers did not force them to study.

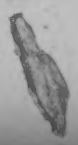
> With 200 or 300 students in one class, the professor does not even know who you are, let alone push you to study. Besides it's your money. If you do not want to study, that's your own choice.

Rose once made the above remark. At the end of the first term, they all agreed that they had become better learners in Canada than they were in China.

While listening to their experiences, I remembered my own struggle to become an independent learner in the first term as a graduate student. As I started to notice the difference between "study" and "research", I realized that my old way of rote learning had to be discarded. I had to learn how to formulate research questions and how to approach them effectively, i.e. I had to learn to be an educational researcher and a critical thinker!

Professor-student relations

While in that Canadian high school, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose were impressed by the informality and friendliness of their teachers. They felt warm and welcomed. However, their "difficulties with the English language seemed to



have affected their adjustment to the teaching style in the Canadian education system, where active student participation was valued and encouraged" (Sheh, 1994, p. 68). Even now Magnolia and *Mei* would rather remain silent in classroom debates and discussions for their English 101 course until they are forced to voice their opinions. As for learning style, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose said that they had become better learners in Canada since nobody here would force them to study and they had to learn to discipline themselves to finish the assignments and lab reports on time. In China, they did not ask questions in class, but in Canada, the professors were more informal and friendly, Jasmine and Rose were more willing to ask questions to help them better understand the lectures.

In his survey research about the international students at the U of A, Arias (1999) notes that students from Asian countries are overly respectful of their professors and look to them for both guidance and ideas. They emphasize rote learning and rely on notes taken in classrooms. So Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose thought that some of their professors were "not competent, not helpful and lazy" when they did not get any notes from a lecture. I felt the same way when I found that some of my professor's lectures lacked organization and that I did not have any notes to take home to review. Now I understand that this is due to the different class format and role expectations of professor and student in two different education systems. Though difficult, we had to learn to adapt to the Canadian education system.

Maintaining GPA

In order to enter the faculties they dreamed of and to stay in the university, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose had to study very hard to maintain high GPA. In fact, they spent most of their waking time studying textbooks and doing their homework. All of them said that there were too many tests and assignments in their coursework, which in turn created a lot of academic pressure in their lives. They were so busy with their studies, especially when tests and exams were coming, that they could not eat properly. They could not tell their parents about their bad eating habit, such as skipping meals or eating instant noodles all the time, because they did not want them to worry about their health. Jasmine said the workload in her program at the Faculty of Engineering was so high that she had learned to "stay up every night to measure my energy reserve" in order not to fall behind. All of them felt guilty if their GPA was "not satisfactory" because they knew how much their parents had done for them in their overseas education. They would study even harder. However, sometimes, they had to drop a course or two in the middle of a term when they realized that course would affect and lower their GPA. It was an expensive choice in terms of money and time. Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose learned to make very careful decisions about the selection of their coursework.

My Reflection on the Research Question

Entering the U of A marked an important step in Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose's overseas studies. Their dreams of going to university finally came true

and they were excited and happy at the beginning of their first term. And I was glad that they joined me on this research journey and hoped that this sharing of our experiences had made a difference in their lives.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that,

> ...experience is the stories people live. People live stories, and in the telling of these stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Stories lived and told educate the self and others, including the young and those such as researchers who are new to their communities (as cited, p. xxvi)

Through telling and retelling their past experiences among themselves and to me, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose began to see their past experiences in different ways. They found out that their university preparation program was not as "meaningless" as they had thought. It did prepare them for the different teaching and learning methods at the U of A and they became familiar with the Canadian education system.

Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose were surprised to have gained new insights into their past experiences. Jasmine started to understand why she was impatient with her broken English. She was anxious to raise her TOEFL score within a very short period of time instead of having a long-term plan of learning a second language. Magnolia changed her mind and put family, not career, at the top of her list when she realized that family was more important to her. Rose, once "a flower in a greenhouse", began to think independently. And *Mei* acknowledged that, "I am an adult now." They all agreed that they have changed and grown and become more mature.

> We retell our stories, remake the past. This is inevitable. Moreover, it is good. To do so is the essence of growth and for Dewey, is an element in the criteria for judging the value of experience. Dewey's reconstruction of

> experience (for us the retelling and reliving of stories) is good in that it defines growth.... The purpose of this retelling, like retellings in any aspect of the narratives of our lives, is to offer possibilities for reliving, for new directions and new ways of doing things. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 189)

Looking back, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose saw that their first university term was filled with errors, difficulties, regrets and tears, as Magnolia called hers "a failure". But they all passed their ESL course in their first term and they were hopeful that they would do better in the future as they had learned many lessons from their past experiences.

Though they are still not certain about their future, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose know that they will finish their first university degrees in Canada and that they will make the best out of their overseas studies.

Chapter Six Making Life Easier: Recommendations and Suggestions

In this chapter I will write three letters to *Dongmei* ("winter plum blossoms"), *Chuntao* ("spring peach blossoms") and Helen (all pseudonyms) respectively to offer my recommendations and suggestions to both parents and educators in China and educators in Canada to better equip and facilitate the students' overseas studies.

A Letter to a Parent in China

To: *Dongmei*, my sister-in-law in Shanghai

Jan. 28, 2001

Dear *Dongmei*,

In the past few months, you have asked me several times whether it is a good idea to send your son, a 17-year-old, to Canada to finish his high school here. I hesitated and postponed my reply because right from the start I wanted to tell you a big NO. Let him finish his high school in China. If he is ready, he can come overseas for his first university degree.

I read from the internet that more and more secondary school students in Shanghai are applying to go abroad to study and more and more foreign education exhibitions are held in Shanghai to attract both university students and secondary school students (Students broaden horizons overseas, 2000). I understand that the fever of studying overseas is infectious, but at the same time, I am very concerned

that Chinese parents are not aware of the consequences and impact of sending their children abroad will have on their future lives.

Yes, "a large number of returned Chinese students have become State leaders, artists, scholars and successful business people" (ibid.). But there is also the other side of the coin, whose picture is not that rosy. I am sure that you have read from the media that not all the students going abroad enjoy their foreign life. Because of "culture shock" some suffer from physical and psychological dis-eases and may never recover completely. They feel lonely, homesick and insecure in a foreign country. Without the supervision of their parents, some students even involve themselves in gambling, stealing, and drinking. It's really sad to see huge amounts of money spent by parents and family and the future of those students ruined.

Because of the one-child policy, children in China are overprotected and/or spoiled by their parents. It will be difficult for those children to live on their own in a foreign country, where they are responsible not only for their studies but also for their daily lives. Apart from studying in a foreign language, they also have to do shopping and cooking, to look for accommodation, to pay bills, to buy clothes and do laundry, to open a bank account, to have a telephone hooked-up and many more trivial things in daily life, things that they will never give any thought to because they are all done by their parents back in China.

To tell you the truth, I have encountered far more difficulties than I had expected when I came here. Please never mention this to either your parents or mine because I always tell them the happy stories, only a small part of my three

years in Canada. For the most part, I struggled to make my way into this strange culture and am still not sure where I will fit in. Can you imagine, that even after studying and teaching English for so long, language was a problem for me at first!

Two years ago, I met four Chinese students on campus. They all finished their high school in China and came here for their first university degree. I have witnessed their struggles and difficulties as they moved from a university preparation program in a Canadian high school here to their first university term. They strongly recommend that Chinese students improve their English writing skills in addition to the study of TOEFL test before going abroad. Since it is also necessary for students to have some knowledge about computing skills, typing and word-processing skills are essential to survive in this new education system. These students feel that if Chinese students could have more freedom and free time to manage their own time in China and make their own decisions regarding their daily lives, no matter how trivial those decisions may be, they would be better off when coming overseas.

I know it sounds weird to you because *Junjun* ("handsome") is your only child and you tend to do everything for him. But you must realize that once he comes here, he will have to lead an independent life and make his own decisions. Let go of him, the sooner, the better. He will graduate from high school next June. So you have one more year to decide whether he is ready to go overseas in terms of his language abilities, independence and maturity. If this is what he really wants, you had better start to prepare him for the following:

- In addition to his high school English study, enroll *Junjun* in courses that teach English conversation and writing and TOEFL. Listen to the radio program *Everyday English*, which teaches Canadian English as well as some aspects of Canadian culture. Watch the English teaching and learning TV program hosted by a Canadian student studying in Beijing.
- Buy one English-Chinese dictionary and one Chinese-English dictionary and some Chinese books that *Junjun* loves to read.
- Ask *Junjun* to improve his English typing skill and go to the local library to learn how to search for useful information via internet.
- Buy him some jeans, many T-shirts and one or two sets of formal suits and a good quality snow-coat with a big hat. Don't buy snow-boots in Shanghai because they won't be good for the extremely cold Edmonton winter.
- Buy some sports equipment, such as ping-pong bats and balls, badminton rackets and shuttles and good-quality sports shoes.
- Give *Junjun* some freedom to decide what to eat, where to go, and when to study or sleep so that he will learn how to manage his own time efficiently.
- Let *Junjun* help you with the shopping, preparation, and cooking of meals. Sometimes you can even ask him to do it for a day or two with a limited budget so that he can learn to manage his money reasonably.
- Let him do his own laundry.
- If he has problems with his studies or his friends, don't fix the problems for him. Give him some time to figure out what he should do and then offer your suggestions.

Calm down and think carefully before you make a decision for your son because it will be a very expensive one. For one thing, he needs at least RMB $100,000 (CND $16,000) a year to complete his overseas study, which means you should make at least RMB $150,000 per year and have no less than RMB $500,000 deposit in the bank. For another, this decision will affect his future life. Ask yourself the following questions before making a decision for him and his future:

1. Is *Junjun*'s English adequate? Has he taken the TOEFL test? What's his score, above 580 or below?
2. What are his study habits? Does he cram just before the exam or does he study regularly?
3. Is he able to manage his time efficiently?
4. Does he have any idea what major he will study in university? After graduation, what does he want to do?
5. Do you ask him to do shopping or cooking sometimes? Does he buy his own clothes? How does he manage his monthly allowance?
6. Has he ever left home and traveled alone to other cities in China? If yes, how did he feel about those experiences?
7. Does he himself really want to go abroad and study? Why?

Personally, I would suggest that he finish his first university degree in China and come to Canada for his graduate degrees. For one thing, at the graduate level, he can apply for assistantship; for another, by then he will be more mature in his behavior and thinking.

Best regards,

Lisa

A Letter to an Educator in China

To: *Chuntao*, a former classmate of mine in Singapore and a university English teacher in Shanghai

Jan. 28, 2001

Dear *Chuntao*,

I haven't heard from you for quite a while. How are you doing? In your last e-mail message just before Christmas, you said that you were very busy because the fall term was coming to an end. I hope that you had a good rest during the Chinese New Year holidays as the spring term will start very soon.

This is the third January I have stayed in Edmonton, better than two previous ones because both *Guoji* and *Jiayan* are with me. However, I still feel gloomy from time to time because of the short daylight and the cold weather. I have to stay in heated rooms, to travel in heated vehicles and to walk outdoors bundling up in awkward clothes. I no longer feel the thrill of the white snow as I did when I first came to Jasper in March 1998. In fact, the monotonous color of white is sickening now. I guess if I learned how to skate or ski, Edmonton winter would not be as bad as it sounds. Well, *Jiayan* certainly enjoys it. She loves her new Canadian winter sport for kids--tobogganing.

I was happy that we could get together when I went back to China in May last year. I wanted to know where the university teaching and learning of English in China was going.

I was excited when you told me that, in September 1999, you initiated an oral English course in addition to the normal English courses offered at your university on a trial basis. You were not sure how many students would come to your class, so you planned to teach two classes, each with 20 students. However, when more than 200 students wanted to take your course, you were overwhelmed. In the end, you had to teach 60 students each class while asking the rest to come back in the following term.

Fully aware that it would be difficult for you to teach such a large class spoken English, you were moved by the warm response from the students and decided to give it a try. In spring 2000 you had to enlist more teachers to help you to teach this course. How I had wished that I could have stayed and been one of those teachers!

It is exciting to see that the teaching and learning of English in China is turning in a new direction, which recognizes that not only the teaching and learning of grammar and vocabulary, reading and tests are important, but also listening and speaking, writing and communication. I am happy that the "mute and deaf" (Li, 1997) English will finally become history for Chinese students, especially those who plan to come overseas to pursue their advanced degrees.

I have met many Chinese students on campus here. They wished that in China teachers had taught them how to use English to express their ideas clearly,

both in written and oral forms. In fact, essay writing and speaking skills were the most difficult for them when they first started their academic studies in Canada. In addition, they complained about the teaching of intensive reading in English, which made them very good analysts of sentence structures but extremely slow readers.

When I listened to them, I had the feeling that they were asking for the impossible because basically what they wanted was to learn English as a means of communication, not just a school subject to study. In a foreign language context, it was very difficult to provide authentic situations for communication. Besides, how many English teachers in China would feel comfortable speaking English all of the time to their students?

But with the coming of the internet, I think it is now possible for students in China to communicate with someone in the English-speaking countries to exchange ideas and information. I believe in five or ten years' time when the universities in China are fully equipped with computers and when the students have easy access to them, English teaching and learning will be quite different from now. At that time, perhaps we can set up some cyber-space classroom so that English learners from different places around the world can communicate with one another via internet for real purposes. However, I don't believe that computers will ever replace English teachers. To be human I need to be around human beings, not machines!

Thank you for being patient and reading all my crazy ideas. Perhaps you should start thinking about offering a writing course for your students. Or if you can wait, I will come back and we will do it together. How does that sound?

By the way, if any of your students are planning to come to Canada for their graduate degrees, please advise them that they should:

- Learn to think in English and express themselves in both oral and written forms.
- Read English as much as possible to enlarge their vocabulary and increase their reading speed (browsing and skimming vs. word-by-word reading).
- Take a course or two in English writing for academic purposes.
- Pass the TOEFL test and expose themselves to as much Canadian English as possible through radio, TV or the internet.
- Learn to present their ideas in a linear way and to the point in both debate and composition.
- Participate actively in classroom interactions instead of just sitting and listening to the teacher.
- Know that "doing" research at the graduate level in Canada is different from studying and "knowing' their subject areas at the undergraduate level in China. It requires a more analytical outlook and critical assessment of what they are taught.
- Know that the tuition in Canada is very expensive. They need at least RMB $150,000 per year for their studies. They can try to find a part time job to support them, but it will be difficult because the jobs available to international

students are very limited and there is a restriction on international students to work off-campus.

- Buy their clothes in China and bring them to Canada.
- Anticipate to live in shared accommodations to reduce the cost of living.
- Have the habit of exercising regularly to stay healthy and energetic to endure the pressure and stress of academic workload.
- Learn to shop and cook healthy food for themselves.
- Develop interpersonal skills so that they will make friends easily.
- Learn to be independent and critical thinkers, to make their own decisions and to manage their time efficiently.
- Prepare themselves psychologically that they will have "culture shock" and that it takes time, patience and tolerance to overcome those initial difficulties.

Take care,

Lisa

A Letter to an Educator in Canada

To: Helen, an ESL teacher in Canada and a friend of mine

Jan. 28, 2001

Dear Helen,

How are you? I haven't contacted you for a long time. Have you kept practicing the *Qigong* exercises I taught you two years ago? Hope you remain as energetic as you were!

Whenever Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose mention you I can see that they have very fond memories of you. You were close to them and you treated them with respect. They really appreciated your efforts to help them with their English and their daily lives. They told me that you drove them across the city to help them find their first apartment! I think they were lucky to have you as their teacher. I can remember all of my English teachers back in China since I started learning English many years ago. They have made such positive influences on my life as a student that I myself became an English teacher 12 years ago. Although, as we all know, not every teacher is great, whether in China or in Canada, good teachers do make a difference in their students' lives, right?

Don't feel upset if Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose don't call you as often as you would like them to. Back in China, very few teachers were so close to them and usually in order to show respect to their teachers they have to keep a distance.

I could sense your unease when you told me that they wanted more homework! For their Canadian peers that might be too much, but not for them! If you had known how their lives were filled with endless homework and exercises in China you would not have felt guilty about assigning them too much homework. On the contrary, they felt "empty" and they "had nothing to do" after school.

After trial and error, they realized that

> learning in a foreign country involves more than just reading new material in a second language. There is a whole underlying realm of culture intimately bound up in an educational system and this culture has to be learned (but not necessarily accepted) before a person can function successfully and comfortably (Upton, 1989, p. 11)

They needed to learn to compromise and then make adjustments between the two vastly different education systems, their different philosophies and the different roles and expectations of students and teachers.

Coming from China, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose needed some time to get used to this informal and friendly North-American classroom culture. In China, in the Confucius tradition, a teacher is seen as a master and students as disciples. This yields a very rigid student-teacher relationship, in which the teacher is the knower and students, empty receptacles (Brooks, 1997, Masur, 1998). An ideal student in China is a quiet, passive person, who does not talk in class unless called upon, who does not ask questions during class period, who does homework and memorizes scientific laws and principles, historical and geographical facts, mathematical, physical, and chemical formulae, and poems and prose of famous poets and writers, ancient or modern... In China, teachers are seen as authorities in their subject areas and what they say is also accepted as truth. The classroom instruction is teacher-centered—almost always in lecture format. The class is always serious with little room for jokes or light-hearted discussion with students (Upton, 1989). Therefore, it is not surprising for these Chinese students to be very respectful to/of their teachers (Arias, 1999).

As a result, it is quite difficult for Chinese students to say NO to their teachers. I am not sure whether you had those confusing experiences with them or not. But many Chinese friends told me that they had those misunderstandings with their professors or supervisors, especially in their early days in Canada when they were not sure how to respond to a request properly. They tended to treat their

supervisors' suggestions or advice as final and thought that they had no choice but to accept them even though they had a different idea.

As for me, even something as simple as learning to maintain eye contact with the professor in a conversation in the classroom took quite a while and a lot of conscious effort because in China, in order to show respect, I had to avert my eyes, just the opposite of what is expected in Canada!

Although some consider the Chinese students to be very hard working, well-disciplined, attentive to details and masterful memorizers of large volumes of information in all subject areas, in China, "independent thinking and acting are often discouraged, or are at least not encouraged" (Upton, 1989, p. 13). However, after coming to Canada, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei*, and Rose soon learned that they had to become more independent and mature learners in order to succeed in this new system. They had to acquire new study skills in order to enrich their learning experiences in Canada because, as you can see, an ideal student in China means something very different than an ideal student in Canada. In Canada, an ideal student should be creative, inquisitive, resourceful, and -- to some extent -- skeptical. Education here is not seen as information to be memorized, but rather as a process and a way of thinking and exploring that is to be developed (Upton, 1989)). Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose were amazed to notice that Canadian teachers often do not feel reluctant to admit their ignorance on a topic, nor will they be angered or embarrassed by challenging questions (Upton, 1989).

The flexibility of the Canadian education system offers many choices, but at the same time, it also "demands a lot of responsibility, initiative and

independence on the part of the student" (Upton, 1989, p. 13). This, at first, created a lot of stress for these four students. As they worked through this new and strange system, and became familiar with it, they started to know where they should go and what they should do. In other words, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose brought a repertoire of learning strategies to Canada and greatly enhanced that repertoire here. It will be interesting to see how much they change before they graduate... and what they will do when they return to China...

Recognizing that Chinese students learn differently and behave differently and that the Chinese culture is very different from the Canadian one, Canadian teachers should not be easily discouraged when, at first, they seem to have a monologue in the classroom. As time goes by, there will be dialogues between teacher and students because, as you once told me, "They may speak English with an accent, but they don't think with an accent!" Thank you for telling me that two years ago, Helen! I think I am lucky to have you as a friend. Because of your suggestions, I started this narrative study with Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei* and Rose a year ago and it has been a very rewarding experience for all of us!

By creating a space for us to share stories of transition, Jasmine, Magnolia, *Mei*, Rose, and I have learned that we were not alone in our feelings and reactions of this sojourn and that we will survive, just like other international students have, in this new country. But how we wish that we had known what "culture shock" was like and that it was "normal" to feel frustrated, bored and uncertain during the first months in a foreign country! How we wish that there had been a better way to

help us learn about the resources available to us when we first came to the U of A campus, and that we had used them!

Hope we can get together soon and have a long chat!

Take care,

Lisa

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Appendixes

A,

October 9, 1999

Dear _____,

I am a graduate student in the Department of Secondary Education at the University of Alberta. I am doing my master's degree.

I am interested in studying issues relating to how female Chinese students make transitions to a new academic and cultural environment in Canada. By so doing, I hope to gain some insights which will enable me to offer some suggestions to both parents and students in China and educators at home and abroad.

I will meet with you every weekend for one to two hours to talk to you individually or as a group during the months of October, November and December, 1999. The interviews and conversations will be tape-recorded and transcribed. You will have a chance to review the transcribed material for its accuracy. You will also be encouraged to write some reflections about your own experiences during this time and share them with me as a part of my research.

I will only use the documents and materials if you permit me to do so. They will be used for research purposes only. I will use them in ways that protect your integrity and identity.

I would like to assure you that you may choose to withdraw from the research project at any time by simply informing me of your intentions.

I hope you will agree to participate in this research and that it will help you learn more about yourself as a human being and help you adjust to the new culture

with more confidence. Please complete and sign the research consent form informing me of your wishes.

Sincerely yours,

Yi (Lisa) Li

B,

University of Alberta

Research Consent Form

I, _____, hereby consent to be interviewed and tape-recorded

(print name of student)

by _____.

(print name of researcher)

I understand that:

- I may withdraw from the research at any time without penalty;
- all information gathered will be treated confidentially and discussed only with the research supervisor;
- I will not be identifiable in any documents resulting from this research.

I also understand that the results of this research will be used only in the following:

- research thesis;
- presentations and written articles for other educators.

_____ _____

(signature of student) (date signed)